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## **With personal and political motivation, Obama seeks increased engagement with Africa in 2011**

By JULIE PACE, Associated Press, Jan 3, 2011, 11:49 AM EST

**HONOLULU (AP)** — President Barack Obama is quietly but strategically stepping up his outreach to Africa, using this year to increase his engagement with a continent that is personally meaningful to him and important to U.S. interests.

Expectations in Africa spiked after the election of an American president with a Kenyan father. But midway through his term, Obama's agenda for Africa has taken a backseat to other foreign policy goals, such as winding down the Iraq war, fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan and resetting relations with Russia.

Obama aides believe those issues are now on more solid footing, allowing the president to expand his international agenda. He will focus in Africa on good governance and supporting nations with strong democratic institutions.

Obama delivered that message on his only trip to Africa since taking office, an overnight stop in Ghana in 2009, where he was mobbed by cheering crowds. In a blunt speech before the Ghanaian parliament, Obama said democracy is the key to Africa's long-term development.

"That is the ingredient which has been missing in far too many places, for far too long," Obama said. "That is the change that can unlock Africa's potential. And that is a responsibility that can only be met by Africans."

The White House says Obama will travel to Africa again and the political calendar means the trip will almost certainly happen this year, before Obama has to spend more time on his re-election bid. No decision has been made on which countries Obama will visit, but deputy national security adviser Ben Rhodes said stops will reflect positive democratic models.

The administration is monitoring more than 30 elections expected across Africa this year, including critical contests in Nigeria and Zimbabwe.

"The U.S. is watching and we're weighing in," Rhodes said.

John Campbell, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and a former U.S. ambassador to Nigeria, said the different elections give the Obama administration the opportunity to establish clear policies.

The administration "should be less willing to cut slack when those elections are less than free, fair and credible," Campbell said.

The White House can send that message right now as it deals with the disputed election in Ivory Coast and an upcoming independence referendum in Sudan, which could split Africa's largest country in two.

Rhodes said the president has invested significant "diplomatic capital" on Sudan, mentioning the referendum in nearly all of his conversations with the presidents of Russia and China, two countries which could wield influence over that Sudan's government.

When Obama stopped in at a White House meeting last month of his national security advisers and United Nations ambassadors, the first topic he broached was Sudan, not Iran or North Korea. And as lawmakers on Capitol Hill neared the December vote on a new nuclear treaty with Russia, Obama called southern Sudan leader Salva Kiir by telephone to offer support for the referendum.

White House officials believe the postelection standoff in Ivory Coast could be the model for Obama's stepped-up engagement in Africa.

The president tried to call incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo twice last month, from Air Force One as Obama returned from Afghanistan and then a week later. Neither call reached Gbagbo; administration officials believe the Ivorian leader sought to avoid contact. So Obama wrote Gbagbo a letter, offering him an international role if he stopped clinging to power and stepped down.

But Obama also made clear that the longer Gbagbo holds on, and the more complicit he becomes in violence across the country, the more limited his options become, said a senior administration official. The official insisted on anonymity to speak about administration strategy.

Human rights groups have accused Gbagbo's security forces of abducting and killing hundreds of political opponents. The U.N. says it also has been barred entry from two suspected mass graves.

Rhodes said the White House understands that U.S. involvement in African politics can be viewed as meddling. But he said Obama can speak to African leaders with a unique level of candor, reflecting his personal connection to Africa and that his father and other family members have been affected by the corruption that plagues many countries there.

Officials also see increased political stability in Africa as good for long-term U.S. interests - a way to stem the growth of terrorism in east Africa and counterbalance China's growing presence on the continent.

The U.S. was caught off guard during the 2009 climate summit in Copenhagen when several African countries voted with China and not the U.S., the administration official said. The official said the administration must persuade African nations that their interests are better served by aligning with the U.S.

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