

RELEASE IN PART
B6

From: Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, July 06, 2009 11:09 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Ghana, but not forgotten

From: Nora Toiv [redacted]
To: Cheryl Mills [redacted]
Sent: Mon Jul 06 10:56:46 2009
Subject: Ghana, but not forgotten

B6



Ghana, but not forgotten

By: Josh Gerstein

July 4, 2009 07:38 PM EST

It might seem like a moment just too good for the White House to pass up – America's first black president, on his first trip to sub-Saharan Africa, looking out over a sea of jubilant faces, delivering a message of friendship and hope.

Yet President Barack Obama, who would command a monumental audience nearly anywhere he spoke on the continent where he traces his ancestry, is not scheduled to deliver a speech to the general public when he visits Ghana next week.

The White House said it preferred a smaller event at Ghana's parliament to herald the nation's democratic traditions. But some suspect the reason has its roots in an event that holds a storied place in White House lore – President Bill Clinton's 1998 speech to a massive crowd in the sweltering heat of Accra, Ghana, where Obama will visit as well.

For Clinton, the first stop on a 12-day, six-country African journey was a chance to bask in the adulation far from Washington, then consumed with the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Clinton now regularly pegs the size of the crowd that day at 1 million, though years ago he described it simply as more than 500,000.

Whatever the number, the overheated, overcrowded, overwhelming event left some in Clinton's party worried that he'd been shot, and a doctor concerned that he could contract HIV from frantic interaction with the crowd. And it took a threatening turn at the end, as a red-faced, shouting Clinton implored the crowd, "Get back! Back off!" as it threatened to crush a woman near the front of the stage.

"The crowd was so large that it began surging towards the stage. Suddenly, a woman in the front of the crowd began to get trampled," recalled Sandy Berger, Clinton's national security adviser at the time. "Clinton jumped up and put his arm down over the side and grabbed her. The Secret Service thought he'd been shot and freaked out."

"He saved her life," Berger said. "It was a kind of tumultuous scene."

Clinton's White House physician Dr. Connie Mariano said she started out that day worried about the heat, but wound up concerned about HIV.

"It was steamy, and hot, and miserable," Mariano recalled. "[Ghana's president General Jerry] Rawlings put a ceremonial robe over [Clinton's] dark business suit and I thought, 'Oh my God, he's going to pass out,'" she said.

Mariano said the feverish crowd and the scuffle over people being crushed at the front left the president nicked up.

"He got scratches. His hands were cut because people's nails were scratching him because they wanted to hold him," she said. "Realize how many HIV-positive people there were there. ... It was an extremely frightening experience."

As the crowd surged forward, police wielding rubber truncheons slammed them down on the hands of people holding onto the barricades. The front-line people would jump back, only to be pushed forward, grab the barricades, and have their hands whacked again. Reporters offering bottled water to parched Ghanaians nearly triggered a stampede.

"I just remember the mass of flesh. There was like a gazillion people, more than I had ever seen in my life," said Ann Scales, who covered the event for The Boston Globe.

Clinton's speechwriter that day, Ted Widmer, recalled a feeling of sensory overload.

"It was surreal in many ways — just one sensation after the next," he said. "Sweat was pouring out of every pore in my body. ... I was seeing these people do a lion dance with deafening drums. ... I've been at plenty of unmemorable political speeches. This one was carnival-esque and fun."

During the presidential primary campaign last year, Clinton often invoked the memory of his Accra speech as an example of when he was at his rhetorical peak. "Back when I was in politics, I was a reasonably good speaker," Clinton told college students in Austin, Texas last February. "I once spoke to a million people in Ghana."

Estimates of how many people were actually on hand that day vary widely. In Clinton's book, "My Life," he says "more than half a million people." White House officials speaking to reporters that day said security aides to Rawlings had also estimated the crowd at more than 500,000. However, The Associated Press reported that Ghanaian officials put it at more than 1 million. The New York Times used the half-million estimate, but also reported that Independence Square, where Clinton spoke, "has a capacity of more than 200,000."

Whatever the true number, Obama isn't trying to top it. He'll address Ghana's parliament, meet the country's president, and tour a slave fort on Ghana's coast on the final stop of week-long trip that also takes him to Russia to meet the country's leaders and Italy for a G-8 summit and to see Pope Benedict XVI.

A senior White House official, speaking on background, said staging Obama's major speech at the parliament "primarily reflects and emphasizes the importance of different

institutions in the political life of Ghana," the official said.

In a briefing for reporters this week, the National Security Council's director for African Affairs, Michelle Gavin, indicated Obama's main interaction with ordinary people during his less-than-24-hour visit will come at the Accra airport during "a departure ceremony that will allow more Ghanaians an opportunity to participate in the visit."

In addition to the challenges inherent in controlling a friendly crowd, another possible factor weighing against a major outdoor speech by Obama is the terrorist threat posed by al Qaeda. The bombings of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania came in August 1998, about five months after Clinton spoke to the throngs in Ghana. Since September 11, 2001, there have also been reports of al Qaeda activity in the West African countries Liberia and Sierra Leone.

"It's another world," Mariano said. "We were pre-9/11 with Clinton. After 9/11, everything changed."

Even without a formal public event, thousands of Ghanaians are sure to flock into the streets in the hopes of getting a glimpse of Obama. There should be no shortage of pictures of excited Africans cheering the U.S. president's visit.

When President George W. Bush went to Ghana in February 2008, he avoided venues that might draw a large crowd. There was no grand speech. Bush met with Peace Corps volunteers at the U.S. ambassador's residence, talked to development groups at a foreign trade center, took in a one-inning tee-ball game, and attended a State Dinner at Osu Castle, which was then the seat of government.

One highlight of Bush's visit was the performance of the U.S. national anthem by American Idol winner Jordin Sparks, who works against malaria.

Of course, in a sense Obama may already have broken whatever record Clinton set in Accra 11 years ago. When Obama was sworn in in January, Washington, D.C. officials estimated the crowd at 1.8 million. Other estimates ranged from 800,000 to 3 million. Of course, no one was in danger of heatstroke. Frostbite was more like it.

In 2008, during the presidential campaign, Obama spoke in Germany to a crowd Berlin police estimated at more than 200,000.

The purported million-strong turnout for Clinton's speech is all the more impressive given Ghana's size. The country's population back in 1998 was estimated at 18.5 million, while about 2 million people lived in the capital.

Berger said Ghanaians still remember the event fondly. "I was in Ghana two weeks ago and people still talk about it," he said. "Everybody I talked to said they were there."

Scales said keeping Obama out of a mass-crowd situation is "probably a very smart decision."

"President Clinton was considered by some the first black president," she said. "Just imagine what kind of crowd America's real first black president could draw."

© 2009 Capitol News Company, LLC

