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Barack Obama

Speech at United Nations High-Level Meeting on Libya



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Thank you for convening this meeting to address a task that must be the work of all of us -- supporting the people of Libya as they build a future that is free and democratic and prosperous. And I want to thank President Jalil for his remarks and for all that he and Prime Minister Jibril have done to help Libya reach this moment.

To all the heads of state, to all the countries represented here who have done so much over the past several months to ensure this day could come, I want to say thank you, as well.

Today, the Libyan people are writing a new chapter in the life of their nation. After four decades of darkness, they can walk the streets, free from a tyrant. They are making their voices heard -- in new newspapers, and on radio and television, in public squares and on personal blogs. They're launching political parties and civil groups to shape their own destiny and secure their universal rights. And here at the United Nations, the new flag of a free Libya now flies among the community of nations.

Make no mistake -- credit for the liberation of Libya belongs to the people of Libya. It was Libyan men and women -- and children -- who took to the streets in peaceful protest, who faced down the tanks and endured the snipers' bullets. It was Libyan fighters, often outgunned and outnumbered, who fought pitched battles, town-by-town, block-by-block. It was Libyan activists -- in the underground, in chat rooms, in mosques -- who kept a revolution alive, even after some of the world had given up hope.

It was Libyan women and girls who hung flags and smuggled weapons to the front. It was Libyans from countries around the world, including my own, who rushed home to help, even though they, too, risked brutality and death. It was Libyan blood that was spilled and Libya's sons and daughters who gave their lives. And on that August day -- after all that sacrifice, after 42 long years -- it was Libyans who pushed their dictator from power.



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At the same time, Libya is a lesson in what the international community can achieve when we stand together as one. I said at the beginning of this process, we cannot and should not intervene every time there is an injustice in the world. Yet it's also true that there are times where the world could have and should have summoned the will to prevent the killing of innocents on a horrific scale. And we are forever haunted by the atrocities that we did not prevent, and the lives that we did not save. But this time was different. This time, we, through the United Nations, found the courage and the collective will to act.

When the old regime unleashed a campaign of terror, threatening to roll back the democratic tide sweeping the region, we acted as united nations, and we acted swiftly -- broadening sanctions, imposing an arms embargo. The United States led the effort to pass a historic resolution at the Security Council authorizing "all necessary measures" to protect the Libyan people. And when the civilians of Benghazi were threatened with a massacre, we exercised that authority. Our international coalition stopped the regime in its tracks, and saved countless lives, and gave the Libyan people the time and the space to prevail.

Important, too, is how this effort succeeded -- thanks to the leadership and contributions of many countries. The United States was proud to play a decisive role, especially in the early days, and then in a supporting capacity. But let's remember that it was the Arab League that appealed for action. It was the world's most effective alliance, NATO, that's led a military coalition of nearly 20 nations. It's our European allies -- especially the United Kingdom and France and Denmark and Norway -- that conducted the vast majority of air strikes protecting rebels on the ground. It was Arab states who joined the coalition, as equal partners. And it's been the United Nations and neighboring countries -- including Tunisia and Egypt -- that have cared for the Libyans in the urgent humanitarian effort that continues today.

This is how the international community should work in the 21st century -- more nations bearing the responsibility and the costs of meeting global challenges. In fact, this is the very purpose of this United Nations. So every nation represented here today can take pride in the innocent lives we saved and in helping Libyans reclaim their country. It was the right thing to do.

Now, even as we speak, remnants of the old regime continue to fight. Difficult days are still ahead. But one thing is clear -- the future of Libya is now in the hands of the Libyan people. For just as it was Libyans who tore down the old order, it will be Libyans who build their new nation. And we've come here today to say to the people of Libya -- just as the world stood by you in your struggle to be free, we will now stand with you in your struggle to realize the peace and prosperity that freedom can bring.

In this effort, you will have a friend and partner in the United States of America. Today, I can announce that our ambassador is on his way back to Tripoli. And this week, the American flag that was lowered before our embassy was attacked will be raised again, over a re-opened American embassy. We will work closely with the new U.N. Support Mission in Libya and with the nations here today to assist the Libyan people in the hard work ahead.

First, and most immediately: security. So long as the Libyan people are being threatened, the NATO-led mission to protect them will continue. And those still holding out must understand -- the old regime is over, and it is time to lay down your arms and join the new Libya. As this happens, the world must also support efforts to secure dangerous weapons -- conventional and otherwise -- and bring fighters under central, civilian control. For without security, democracy and trade and investment cannot flourish.



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Second: the humanitarian effort. The Transitional National Council has been working quickly to restore water and electricity and food supplies to Tripoli. But for many Libyans, each day is still a struggle -- to recover from their wounds, reunite with their families, and return to their homes. And even after the guns of war fall silent, the ravages of war will continue. So our efforts to assist its victims must continue. In this, the United States -- the United Nations will play a key role. And along with our partners, the United States will do our part to help the hungry and the wounded.

Third: a democratic transition that is peaceful, inclusive and just. President Jalil has just reaffirmed the Transitional National Council's commitment to these principles, and the United Nations will play a central role in coordinating international support for this effort. We all know what is needed -- a transition that is timely, new laws and a constitution that uphold the rule of law, political parties and a strong civil society, and, for the first time in Libyan history, free and fair elections.

True democracy, however, must flow from its citizens. So as Libyans rightly seek justice for past crimes, let it be done in a spirit of reconciliation, and not reprisals and violence. As Libyans draw strength from their faith -- a religion rooted in peace and tolerance -- let there be a rejection of violent extremism, which offers nothing but death and destruction. As Libyans rebuild, let those efforts tap the experience of all those with the skills to contribute, including the many Africans in Libya. And as Libyans forge a society that is truly just, let it enshrine the rights and role of women at all levels of society. For we know that the nations that uphold the human rights of all people, especially their women, are ultimately more successful and more prosperous.

Which brings me to the final area where the world must stand with Libya, and that is restoring prosperity. For too long, Libya's vast riches were stolen and squandered. Now that wealth must serve its rightful owners -- the Libyan people. As sanctions are lifted, as the United States and the international community unfreeze more Libyan assets, and as the country's oil production is restored, the Libyan people deserve a government that is transparent and accountable. And bound by the Libyan students and entrepreneurs who have forged friendships in the United States, we intend to build new partnerships to help unleash Libya's extraordinary potential.

Now, none of this will be easy. After decades of iron rule by one man, it will take time to build the institutions needed for a democratic Libya. I'm sure there will be days of frustration; there will be days when progress is slow; there will be days when some begin to wish for the old order and its illusion of stability. And some in the world may ask, can Libya succeed? But if we have learned anything these many months, it is this: Don't underestimate the aspirations and the will of the Libyan people.

So I want to conclude by speaking directly to the people of Libya. Your task may be new, the journey ahead may be fraught with difficulty, but everything you need to build your future already beats in the heart of your nation. It's the same courage you summoned on that first February day; the same resilience that brought you back out the next day and the next, even as you lost family and friends; and the same unshakeable determination with which you liberated Benghazi, broke the siege of Misurata, and have fought through the coastal plain and the western mountains. It's the same unwavering conviction that said, there's no turning back; our sons and daughters deserve to be free.



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In the days after Tripoli fell, people rejoiced in the streets and pondered the role ahead, and one of those Libyans said, "We have this chance now to do something good for our country, a chance we have dreamed of for so long." So, to the Libyan people, this is your chance. And today the world is saying, with one unmistakable voice, we will stand with you as you seize this moment of promise, as you reach for the freedom, the dignity, and the opportunity that you deserve.

So, congratulations. And thank you very much.