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President's Economic Strategy Considers Needs of Struggling Blacks, Say Aides

By Dorothy Rowley

Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspapers

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - President Barack Obama told supporters in the waning weeks of his election campaign that once he got to the White House he would hit the ground running in order to stabilize the economy and put the nation back on solid footing.

He also said he was all about bringing people together and engaging them in the process of restoring the country's reputation as a super power, while eradicating longtime partisan differences.

Not only has Obama kept his word, says Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser and assistant to the president, but he is the only president in recent memory to accomplish as much as he did last week.

All totaled, the president tackled eight priorities, she said.

"It's been an exciting time... it's been a busy week," Jarrett told reporters during a media teleconference March 6, before rattling off a list of activities in which the president was involved.

The list included a fiscal summit, followed by meetings with national security teams of Afghanistan and Pakistan governments and a highly successful healthcare summit that engaged people from across the country and several walks of life.

However, since assuming the leadership helm six weeks ago, Obama, in addition to dealing with the mounting deficit, also inherited two wars as well as ongoing issues involving housing, health care, public education and energy - all of which have had a disparate impact on the African-American community. Many of the concerns were denied funding in previous administrations.

Jarrett noted, in particular, that while the unemployment rate has skyrocketed, African-Americans have been most affected.

"Today, we saw that the unemployment rate has generally gone up 8.1 percent," she said. "However, before today, the African-American unemployment rate was 12.6 percent." Further, "over 95 percent of public school kids are African-American, so focusing on public education is [just as] critical."

An Ebony magazine reporter queried Jarrett on what policies the administration has in place to help African-Americans "come out of a hole."

Jarrett responded that since the bulk of the African-American population can be found in cities, a large portion of stimulus funding, such as the \$800 million earmarked for Washington, D.C. - which is more than 90 percent Black - would be directed for that purpose.

Job Losses Continue to Soar, Blacks at 13.4 Percent

By Dorothy Rowley

Special to the NNPA from the Afro-American Newspapers

WASHINGTON (NNPA) - "Astounding" is how President Obama,

speaking March 6 in Columbus, Ohio, characterized the nation's new unemployment figures - a staggering 8.1 percent, the highest since 1983 as employers pick up the pace of layoffs.

Just as disconcerting is the sharp rise in unemployment among African-Americans - a whopping 13.4 percent in February. The last time the Black monthly unemployment rate was so high was in February 1994, as the nation was digging out of a recession, according to the Labor Department.

The latest figures continue to show job losses are large and widespread across nearly all major industry sectors. In January, the overall national unemployment rate was 7.6 percent. For Blacks, it was 12.6 percent.

Bureau of Labor Statistics indicate the Black unemployment rate has traditionally far exceeded that of other ethnic groups, especially Whites whose joblessness is normally half that of African-Americans.

Reasons for the disparity cited by experts include a gap in education between Blacks and Whites, marginal ties by African-American households to the labor market and a failure by policy-makers to equate Black unemployment to a crisis needing urgent attention.

The BLS Web site, which maintains Black unemployment data dating back to 1972, also states that the Black jobless rate reached its lowest level on record in April 2000, when it dropped to 7.0 percent.

While the agency's latest figures highlight a growing gender gap between Black men and women in the workforce, it also shows that the unemployment rate for Black men in February was 16.3 percent compared to 10.8 percent for Black women.

The Washington, D.C.-based Economic Policy Institute's Race, Ethnicity and Economy Program reported recently that Blacks are typically impacted by recessions and that it comes as no surprise that there is a significant increase in Black unemployment during such times.

Program Director Algernon Austin offered in a recent Chicago Sun article that lack of job opportunities for Blacks ultimately trickles down to teens, making it doubly hard for them to find work, particularly with summer on the horizon.

"We really want teens to work," Austin said. "Getting job experience now really helps people in their employment."

The jobless rate for teens in general is just over 21 percent.

However, Austin noted that the rate among Black teens has already surpassed 38 percent and that the figure could be as high as 44 percent for teens still looking for work.

"The really sad and troubling part of this is most likely these aren't the peak numbers," Austin says in the article, suggesting that the peak will come in a year's time, "unless the stimulus comes in and works."

The latest figures continue to show job losses are widespread across nearly all major industry sectors. Construction and manufacturing jobs have been among the hardest hit, a continuing concern for such groups as the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists.

The organization periodically blasted the Bush era, saying unemployment among African-Americans had become so dismal during his administration that it was well on its way to becoming a socially explosive issue, mainly because a growing segment of the Black community, including its youth, had begun to feel permanently disconnected from the economy.

Now, with President Obama at the helm, his administration maintains he has made a considerable thrust at providing job training programs in inner cities where the largest populations of African-Americans tend to reside, as well as an increase in government jobs through the recently enacted \$787 billion economic recovery plan.

"The president is going to do his job but needs to get the word out [to city and state agency heads about] how high the stakes are," Obama senior adviser Valerie Jarrett said last week during a teleconference with Black journalists.



The Durham United Negro College Fund Steering Committee was joined by Miss Black North Carolina, Nefertiti Byrd, a Shaw University student, at its Evening of Stars and Taping and Silent Auction March 7, at Hayti Heritage Center. Miss Byrd take a moment at the event with Mrs. Juanita Massenburg. Related Photos on page 4. (Photo By Lawson)

Court refuses to expand minority voting rights

WASHINGTON (AP) - The Supreme Court ruled March 9 in a case from North Carolina that electoral districts must have a majority of African-Americans or other minorities to be protected by a provision of the Voting Rights Act.

The 5-4 decision, with the court's conservatives in the majority, could make it harder for southern Democrats to draw friendly boundaries after the 2010 Census.

The court declined to expand protections of the landmark civil rights law to take in electoral districts where the minority population is less than 50 percent of the total, but strong enough to effectively determine the outcome of elections.

In 2007, the North Carolina Supreme Court struck down a state legislative district in which blacks made up only about 39 percent of the voting age population. The court said the Voting Rights Act applies only to districts with a numerical majority of minority voters.

Justice Anthony Kennedy, announcing the court's judgment, said that requiring minorities to represent more than half the population "draws clear lines for courts and legislatures alike. The same cannot be said of a less exacting standard."

Chief Justice John Roberts and Justice Samuel Alito signed onto Kennedy's opinion. Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas agreed with the outcome of the case.

The four liberal justices dissented. A district like the one in North Carolina should be protected by federal law "so long as a cohesive minority population is large enough to elect its chosen candidate when combined with a reliable number of crossover voters from an otherwise polarized majority." Justice David Souter wrote for himself and Justices Stephen Breyer, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and John Paul Stevens.

The decision complicates matters for southern Democrats who will redo political boundaries after the next census.

Democrats have sought to create districts in which African-Americans, though not a majority, still were numerous enough to determine the outcome of elections with the help of small numbers of like-minded white voters. Those districts could be challenged under the March 9 decision.

In another election-related case, the court let stand an appeals court decision that invalidated state laws regulating the ways independent presidential candidates can get on state ballots.

Arizona, joined by 13 other states, asked the court to hear its challenge to a ruling throwing out its residency requirement for petition circulators and a June deadline for submitting signatures for independent candidates in the November presidential elections.

Independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader sued and won a favorable ruling from the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco.

National Drug Arrests Skewed by Race

Special to the NNPA from the Indianapolis Recorder

(NNPA) - Blacks have been arrested nationwide on drug charges at higher rates than Whites for nearly three decades, even though they engage in drug offenses at comparable rates. Human Rights Watch said in a report released last week.

Using data obtained from the FBI, the report reveals the extent and persistence of racial disparities in US drug-law enforcement. The data also show that most drug arrests are for nothing more serious than possession.

The 20-page report, "Decades of Disparity: Drug Arrests and Race in the United States," says that adult African-Americans were arrested on drug charges at rates that were 2.8 to 5.5 times as high as those of white adults in every year from 1980 through 2007, the last year for which complete data were available. About one in three of the more than 25.4 million adult drug arrestees during that period was African-American.

"Jim Crow may be dead, but the drug war has never been color-blind," said Jamie Fellner, senior counsel with Human Rights Watch's U.S. Program and author of the report. "Although whites and Blacks use and sell drugs, the heavy hand of the law is more likely to fall on Black shoulders."

The report also says that arrests for drug possession have greatly exceeded arrests for drug sales every year since 1980. Indeed, the proportion of drug arrests for possession has been increasing, amounting to 80 percent or more annually since 1999. Marijuana possession accounts for a large proportion of drug arrests: in the years 2000 through 2007, the proportion of all drug arrests that was for marijuana possession ranged from 37.7 percent to 42.1 percent. The report is the latest by Human Rights Watch exploring human rights violations, including racial discrimination, in the context of the "war on drugs."

"Hauling hundreds of thousands of people down to the station-house each year because they have some weed or a rock of crack cocaine in their pocket has had little impact on drug use," said Fellner. "But the stigma of a drug arrest, especially if followed by a conviction, limits employment, education and housing opportunities. A more effective, less destructive drug policy would prioritize treatment, education, and positive social investments in poor communities over arrest and incarceration."

Obama gently departs from Holder's race comment

WASHINGTON (AP) - President Barack Obama says he would not have used the same language that Eric Holder did last month when the attorney general declared that the United States is a nation of cowards on matters of race.

"We've made enormous progress and we shouldn't lose sight of that," Obama told The New York Times in an interview posted on the newspaper's Web site March 7.

The president said he understood Holder to be saying the country often is uncomfortable talking about race until there's a racial flare-up or conflict and that the nation probably could be more constructive in facing up to slavery and discrimination.

The first U.S. black president gently departed from the tone of the comments by the country's first black attorney general.

The president said he is not someone who believes that constantly talking about race can solve racial tensions. To address that problem, it will mean fixing the economy, putting people to work, making sure that people have health care and ensuring that children are learning, Obama said.

"I think if we do that, then we'll probably have more fruitful conversations," Obama said in the interview March 7 aboard Air Force One.

In a speech to Justice Department employees marking Black History Month, Holder said that while the country has proudly thought of itself as an ethnic melting pot, "in things racial we have always been and I believe continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards."

Jazz saxophonist Marsalis lobbies Legislature

RALEIGH (AP) - Jazz great and North Carolina resident Branford Marsalis wanted to lobby the state Legislature, but he couldn't stay out of the spotlight.

The Grammy-winning Durham resident said he visited the General Assembly on March 5 to lobby on behalf of the North Carolina Symphony. He is a member of the symphony's Board of Trustees.

Senate leaders invited Marsalis to join them on the legislative floor, where he was given a North Carolina flag and posed for photos with lawmakers.

Marsalis said he would have brought his saxophone to the Legislature if he'd known he would be in front of a microphone.