

Graft is reversing Kenya's democratic gains: Obama

Gulf Times

Gulf Times Newspaper, 2006 ©

August 29, 2006

NAIROBI: Kenya risks losing its status as a model of African democracy if it does not urgently crack down on corruption that has reached crisis levels and stifled development, US Senator Barack Obama said yesterday.

Western nations must ensure they practise what they preach to African nations about graft, said Obama, a rising star in the US Democratic Party.

"While corruption is a problem we all share, here in Kenya it is a crisis - a crisis that's robbing an honest people of the opportunities they have fought for," Obama told an audience at the University of Nairobi.

Obama, born in Hawaii to a Kenyan father and white American mother, is on his first trip to Kenya since being elected to the Senate in 2004 and has become an idol to many in the east African country who see him as a native son.

He said Kenya had made great strides since independence from Britain in 1963 and remained "a model of representative democracy, a place where many different ethnic factions have found a way to live and work together."

But corruption is threatening all that by hampering development and the creation of strong, accountable institutions, he said.

"If the people cannot trust their government to do the job for which it exists - to protect them and promote their common welfare - then all else is lost. That is why the struggle of corruption is one of the great struggles of our time," he said.

He said graft had allowed Felicien Kabuga, wanted for war crimes in Rwanda's 1994 genocide, to find safe haven in Kenya and had infected the police force to the point that it was "a source of insecurity."

The government of President Mwai Kibaki, elected in 2002 on a promise to wipe out the graft which had characterised the 24-year rule of his predecessor Daniel arap Moi, has itself been hit by a string of graft scandals in the past year.

Three ministers have resigned, and donors have sharply criticised what they see as slow action and an overabundance of anti-corruption agencies lacking real power to fight graft.

Obama said there were "signs of progress being made," including the Kenyan media exposing corruption, more people reporting graft and increasing recognition among people and politicians that it is a critical issue.

The senator, the only black in the US legislature's upper house, was even more loudly applauded when he addressed what many Africans see as Western hypocrisy and complicity in graft.

"When Western nations talk about corruption, they should make sure they are cleaning their own house," he said to cheers.

He told the audience that the US too had its own graft problem: "My own city of Chicago, Illinois, has been the home of some of the more corrupt local politics in American history."

But he said the US punished those who abused their public positions for personal gain, pointing out that one US lawmaker had resigned for taking bribes and several others had fallen under investigation in the past year. – Reuters