Some in Africa expect miracles from Obama

By Zoe Alsop, Special for USA TODAY

NAIROBI, Kenya — Two years ago, Barack and Michelle Obama were tested for AIDS before an audience of thousands here in an effort to remove the public stigma from the disease.

After the election of a man many Kenyans consider a native son, the question has become: What else will Barack Obama be able to accomplish for Africa once he becomes president?

As in much of the world, hopes for his presidency are high — perhaps unreasonably so. William Kioko, 35, a bus driver in Nairobi's Kibera slum, said Obama's victory was "like a miracle."

"If this change is possible in the United States," Kioko said, "then curing the African wars is easy."

African experts are optimistic but much more subdued. They say the global economic crisis and the United States' considerable military commitments overseas may stymie Obama if he tries to intervene in conflicts in Darfur, build on President Bush's groundbreaking AIDS programs or take on Islamic extremists in the Horn of Africa.

"These are clearly issues that President-elect Obama is passionate about and serious about," said John Norris, executive director of the Washington-based Enough Project, which campaigns against crimes against humanity.

"There's a lot of goodwill and a sense of optimism. But that new approach is being tempered by a lot of realism about the magnitude of the problems that he has to deal with," Norris said.

Expectations have been high in Africa ever since Obama, whose father was from Kenya, traveled to the continent as a senator in 2006 and proclaimed, "You are all my brothers and sisters." He visited Kenya, South Africa, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Chad and told cheering crowds that he would lobby for help back in the USA to solve their problems.

Aware of the limitations now that Obama is president-elect, African leaders have tried to tamp down their own people's hopes. "Africans must not ask extraordinary things from (Obama), must not expect … that through the miracle of his election, America will drain money on Africa to change our continent," Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade warned last week, according to Reuters. "I don't think that's going to happen, and it wouldn't be a good thing."

AIDS and HIV, which infect about 22 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, is an issue where the money crunch could be particularly acute.

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The U.S. Congress has passed legislation that would triple funding for the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, which provides drugs to about 1.2 million HIV-positive Africans. Because of the economic crisis, paying out that projected $48 billion bill over the next five years could force cuts in other critical foreign aid programs, says Laurie A. Garrett, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations.

"If they cut the rest of foreign assistance by 50% or more, we're going to be running a U.S. foreign assistance that is just basically three things: Iraq, Afghanistan and AIDS," Garrett said. "Lord help you if you are a child with diarrhea, Lord help you if you are a woman in need of a C-section."

Peter Piot, the executive director of the United Nations' AIDS program, warned last month that even if foreign aid stays at current levels, AIDS deaths worldwide could reach 3 million per year by 2011, up from 2 million in 2007.

Treating those enrolled in programs such as PEPFAR is getting more expensive. Many patients develop resistance to first-line drugs and require pricier second-line medications. Africa also experiences the same problems seen elsewhere in the world.

"The dollar has declined so much in value," Garrett said. "There is the food crisis, the economic crisis and energy crisis, and when you put it together, the cost of doing anything is far greater today than it was a year ago."

Garrett said she does expect one instant benefit from an Obama administration: a step away from the Bush administration's emphasis on abstinence programs. In practice, that has resulted in a greater emphasis on AIDS treatment than on prevention, she said. "People have been more comfortable with money going out the door to buy drugs than to buy condoms," she said.

Other African issues that could command Obama's attention when he takes office in January are violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where 250,000 have been displaced this year, and the economic crisis in Zimbabwe, where President Robert Mugabe's government has seen inflation rise to 11.2 million%. During his campaign, Obama condemned Mugabe's intimidation of the opposition.

In Kenya, tensions have subsided since December, when violence after a disputed election resulted in more than 1,000 deaths. On a dusty plot where an open-air market used to stand before it was razed during the bloodshed, young Kenyans took a break from a game of soccer to dream about what having Obama in the White House might mean for them.

"People will come from America to see where he is from," said Graphine Okinda, 16. "The tourist industry will improve. Maybe, when I finish school, I can be employed in a big hotel."

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