

World risks becoming immune to crises: General Martin Dempsey |

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Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey. 'A disproportionate responsibility is being borne by some few.' Source: AFP

The top US military official warned yesterday that the world risks becoming immune to the suffering caused by escalating global security threats.

General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, said it would be "a historical shame" if the world didn't realise it was reaching a point where it became insensitive to the magnitude of the problems caused by international crises.

"The world is at genuine risk of becoming immune to suffering, and if that happens I don't know where it stops," General Dempsey told several dozen ambassadors and military attaches at an event sponsored by the US mission to the UN.

He urged world leaders and governments to "shake ourselves back into the reality that we can do something about it". "In my 41 years of military service, I've never witnessed such significant shifts in the international security environment as we are seeing all around us today," he said.

"The complex array of threats and, let's call it geopolitical jockeying, requires all of us to contend with an unpredictable landscape."

General Dempsey, who will be stepping down and retiring on October 1 after four years, said today's security challenges cut across geography, diplomacy, economics and ideology with no clear-cut boundaries, making them difficult to contain.

He said the UN's peacekeeping operations must keep pace. "Peacekeeping operations are under greater strain than ever before," he said. "Simply stated, a disproportionate responsibility is being borne by some few to ensure the stability and security of so many. This imbalance is unsustainable."

He urged governments to provide more sophisticated equipment "or else risk failure of ongoing — and future — UN peacekeeping missions". There are 120,000 peacekeepers deployed in 16 far-flung operations.

Barack Obama leaves Africa after push on democracy, security

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Barack Obama arrived in East Africa with no big American aid packages, no ramped up US military resources for fighting terror groups and no new initiatives with billions in government backing.

Instead, the US President brought a frank message on democracy, corruption and security that could perhaps be delivered only by a Western leader viewed in Africa as a local son.

"The future of Africa is up to Africans," Mr Obama said during a trip to Kenya and Ethiopia that concluded yesterday. "For too long, I think that many looked to the outside for salvation and focused on somebody else being at fault for the problems of the continent."

The President's advisers reject the notion that Mr Obama's policy towards Africa is all talk, pointing to the long-term potential of initiatives to boost power access and food security for millions on the continent.

They stress the importance of America's first black president, one with family still in Kenya, capitalising on his ability to speak not as a lecturing Westerner, but as someone with a personal stake in the continent's success. "He is someone who is broadly respected by not just the leaders, but the peoples of these countries, especially young populations who make up an increasing percentage of these countries," said Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes.

"So, for that reason, I think people pay close attention to what he has to say. "That doesn't mean that they're going to agree with everything he says, but I think he can lay out a direction that he thinks the US-African partnership can go in."

Indeed, Mr Obama closed his East Africa swing with a blunt accounting of the risks facing the fast-growing continent. He compared Africa's large youth population to the Middle East, warning that without jobs and prospects for the future, young Africans were more likely to be drawn to terrorism.

He warned of the "cancer of corruption" that runs rampant through some African governments, a problem he said only the continent's leaders could solve. And with high-level African officials in the audience at the African Union headquarters, he launched on Tuesday night a blistering and sometimes sarcastic take-down of leaders who refuse to leave office when their terms end.

"Let me be honest with you — I just don't understand this," he said, drawing cheers from many in the crowd. "I actually think I'm a pretty good president. I think if I ran, I could win. But I can't."

While those remarks drew cheers from many in the crowd, some African activists greeted his comment one day earlier that Ethiopia has a democratically elected government with scorn and concern. Mr Obama's remarks came during a news conference with Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn of Ethiopia, whose ruling party won every seat in parliament in May elections.

Mr Obama's predecessors have also pushed for good governance and respect for human rights in Africa. But none had the instant credibility African leaders confer on Mr Obama, whose visit was heralded as a homecoming.

"It would have been different of course if he was from a different background," said Amadou Sy, director of the Africa Growth Initiative at the Brookings Institution. "But he's also one of us." Mr Obama barely knew his father, who was born and is buried in Kenya. The younger Obama wouldn't visit the nation of his father's birth until he was in his 20s, yet his political rise has been cheered enthusiastically throughout the continent.

His connections to Africa garnered oversized expectations for what his tenure as US president would mean for the continent.

While he's made four trips to sub-Saharan Africa since taking office — more than any other US president — his foreign policy focus has often been on boosting ties with the Asia-Pacific region and confronting crises in the Middle East. Mr Obama also faces frequent comparisons to his predecessor George W. Bush, who launched a \$US15 billion (\$20.5bn) initiative for combating HIV/AIDS in Africa.

“I am really proud of the work that previous administrations did here in Africa, and I’ve done everything I could to build on those successes,” Mr Obama said in Kenya on Saturday. “This isn’t a beauty contest between presidents.”

At the heart of Mr Obama’s approach to Africa is a belief that the US and other developed nations can no longer view the continent simply as a receptacle for billions in international aid.

In an era of budget cuts, the President has looked to jump-start programs that rely heavily on private financing and could eventually be run by African governments or businesses, including his Feed The Future food security program and Power Africa electricity initiative.

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It does seem that what Obama does best is talk - it will be interesting if history ultimately credits him with being more than a good talker.