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Ban Ki-Moon Lays Out U.N. Agenda

By Edith M. Lederer

UNITED NATIONS — South Korea's Ban Ki-moon laid out an ambitious agenda as the next U.N. secretary-general, promising to become personally engaged in efforts to bring peace to the Mideast and Darfur and to clean up the world body.

The 62-year-old career diplomat, who was sworn in Thursday to a five-year term that begins Jan. 1, also said he plans "concerted action" to achieve U.N. development goals that include cutting extreme poverty by half and universal education by 2015.

Calling himself "a harmonizer and a bridge-builder," Ban said he also wants to repair relations between the U.N.'s rich and poor member states who fought bitterly over parts of the reform program proposed by his predecessor, Kofi Annan, who is stepping down after 10 years,

"You could say that I'm a man on a mission, and my mission could be dubbed Operation Restore Trust—trust in the organization and trust between member states and the Secretariat," he said.

"I hope this mission is not mission impossible," he told reporters who burst into laughter.

Ban also showed his sense of humor at the start of his news conference after the swearing-in ceremony, noting that the media in South Korea dubbed him "the slippery eel because I was too charming for them to be able to catch me." He said the nickname was given to him "because I was very friendly with the media ... but I promise today that I can be a pretty straight shooter when I need to."

In his sharpest comments, Ban said Iran's call for Israel's destruction and its dismissal of the Nazi Holocaust were "unacceptable"—and he called on all countries to respect "both in rhetoric and practice" that it is not acceptable to call for the elimination of any state or people.

Ban also expressed concern about the regional and global implications of Tehran's nuclear program and urged the Iranian government to engage in negotiations with the six parties that offered a package of incentives if it suspends uranium enrichment.

As South Korea's foreign minister, Ban was deeply involved in the six-nation effort to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program. He said he will be watching the talks, which resume Monday in Beijing, and thinking about initiatives he can take as secretary-general.

Ban also said he planned to become "directly engaged" in efforts to bring peace to Sudan's Darfur region, adding his first trip may be to an African Union summit in late January. The AU provides the peacekeeping force in Darfur which has been unable to quell nearly four years of violence that has left more than 200,000 people dead and created a massive humanitarian crisis.

"The suffering of the people of Darfur is simply unacceptable, and despite intensive efforts, the security situation appears to be deteriorating over recent days," he said.

Ban singled out Middle East peace as a priority and said he will try "to energize" an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan drafted by the so-called Quartet of Mideast peacemakers—the United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the U.S. He also expressed concern about the deteriorating situations in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as conflicts in Africa.

Ban will be the first Asian to lead the United Nations in 35 years. His selection is also a milestone for South Korea, which only joined the United Nations in 1991 and still has U.N. troops on the tense border with North Korea.

Ban defeated six other candidates vying to be the U.N. chief and was first selected by the Security Council and then approved by the General Assembly in October.

On Thursday, he said he would prefer a woman for deputy secretary-general and was looking at several names, which he did not disclose.

Ban will oversee an organization with some 92,000 peacekeepers around the world and a \$5 billion annual budget. The U.N.'s reputation has been battered by scandals in the \$64 million Iraq oil-for-food program and in peacekeeping procurement. Its outdated practices need reform to tackle this century's problems.

In a brief address after being sworn in, Ban pledged "to set the highest ethical standard" and work to restore trust in the organization.

"The good name of the United Nations is one of its most valuable assets—but also one of its most vulnerable," Ban said.

Ban distanced himself from Annan's farewell address on Monday in which the secretary-general criticized the Bush administration's global leadership. Annan called on America not to sacrifice its democratic ideals while waging war and to work with other countries.

"That I think, was his own personal assessment and insight, which he gained during his tenure," Ban said.

He stressed that the U.S. was an important U.N. member and said he would personally work to resolve differences of opinion between Washington and the world body and ensure constructive U.S. participation in all U.N. activities.

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