

Elections could haunt Clinton in 1998

By Jim Lobe

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (IPS) — President Bill Clinton faces a difficult year in 1998, especially because many of the foreign policy targets he set in 1997 remain uncompleted or are in peril.

While relations with Russia and China appear to have stabilized, the stalemate in the Arab-Israeli peace process and continuing defiance by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, make the Middle East a prime candidate for trouble in 1998.

The Asian financial crisis also raises major questions about how Washington will react to a new Asian export drive and demands for more bailout money.

The loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs in the region could lead to political instability in some key countries, such as Indonesia, which may in turn present unpredictable challenges to U.S. policy and interests there.

Clinton also faces major struggles here at home in gaining congressional support for top-priority initiatives which lawmakers rejected last year.

Foremost among these are his requests to Congress for billions of dollars for the International Monetary Fund, plus hundreds of millions of dollars to pay Washington's arrears to the United Nations and for "fast-track" authority to negotiate new trade agreements.

The fact that 1998 is an election year in Congress might limit his room to maneuver on all these issues by making the task of fashioning bipartisan majorities far more difficult. It also means that well-funded and organized interest groups will enjoy more political clout than usual.

Moreover, the fact that Clinton's Democratic Party remains deeply in debt from the 1996 election campaign further could erode his ability to persuade reluctant lawmakers to back him on

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BILL CLINTON

controversial policies. That could have a major impact on a number of initiatives which Clinton had hoped to have settled during the past year.

In the Middle East, for example, Clinton had clearly wanted to obtain a substantial Israeli pullback from the still-occupied West Bank and thus restore momentum to the Oslo peace process.

But Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu effectively froze the process last March, spurning Washington's calls to lay out plans for "credible" withdrawals and stoking Palestinian and Arab anger.

The impasse now not only jeopardizes the Oslo accords, but also Washington's position in the Arab world.

But the question for 1998 is whether Clinton can summon up the will to apply serious pressure on Netanyahu, especially in an election year when lawmakers will be looking as much for campaign help to the powerful 'Israel Lobby' as to the White House. "It's clear that Netanyahu's game has been to stall as long as possible," says one Congressional aide. "That strategy could earn dividends next (1998) year."

A similar logic applies to policy towards Iran. Clinton had hoped to avoid a damaging fight with the European Union over a law that penalizes foreign firms which invest in Iran's energy sector. U.S. lawmakers, eager to show their toughness against ayatollahs, will press

for the imposition of sanctions. The result may be a major diplomatic headache for Clinton and increased US isolation in the Gulf in 1998.

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Clinton has vowed to push for funding for the United Nations and the IMF as well as for "fast-track" authority to negotiate new trade agreements early this year — all initiatives which he failed to achieve last year. But it's not clear that he will succeed.

Fast-track authority, which ensures that Congress cannot amend new trade accords once they are negotiated, has been a major goal of the administration, which counts the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement among its greatest achievements.

Clinton has argued that Washington's future in an age of economic globalization will rely increasingly on exports to emerging markets, especially in Latin America and Asia. Three of four Democrats in the House of Representatives, however, opposed Clinton's 1997 request because it did not include strong protections for labor rights and the environment.

With a resurgent labor movement flush with cash and energy for the political wars next

November, most analysts rate Clinton's chances of gaining Democratic support for a similar bill at next to nothing.

The White House reportedly has given up on a fast-track bill that would authorize new trade accords with Chile and other Latin American nations despite Clinton's avowed goal of achieving a Free Trade Area of the Americas by 2005.

Instead, it will seek approval for a much more narrowly targeted proposal to liberalize global trade and investment rules in specific sectors, like high-technology and agriculture. Clinton faces similar difficulties in gaining the \$3.5 billion he wants for the IMF and almost one billion dollars for the United Nations.

Both requests were blocked last year when anti-abortion forces in the House refused to approve them unless Clinton agreed to bar all aid to family-planning groups abroad which urge their governments to ease laws against abortion.

Backed by a strong women's lobby, another key Democratic constituency, Clinton has vowed to veto such a provision if it comes before him, but the Republican leadership has lined up solidly behind the anti-abortion forces, setting up a stalemate that will be very difficult to overcome.

Such an impasse could be very damaging to the United States, particularly in light of the financial crisis in Asia where the governments are relying on huge, IMF-led bailouts. If the United States is not seen as doing its fair share, anti-US sentiment in the region could rise sharply.

Washington's failure to pay its back dues to the United Nations will not only stall a major reform program in the world body, but is also certain to increase resentment among European allies and other countries which will be asked to make up shortfalls caused by the last remaining superpower's deadbeat status.

Hospital

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Studies, a research and policy think tank which attempts to increase black involvement in public issues, recently held a series of forums on this issue, in conjunction with the Commonwealth Fund of New York. What emerged from these forums was a set of six policy options and positions that, if adopted, could go a long way toward ensuring that the health care resource that public hospitals represent to inner city residents is preserved.

First: Maintain support from the community and local government by ensuring that these groups and officials are well informed and can participate in the decisions affecting the survival of public hospitals.

Second: Public hospitals should aggressively compete

with managed care organizations for low-risk Medicaid and Medicare patients.

Third: State and local governments should upgrade urban public hospitals so they can have a realistic chance of competing for patients.

Fourth: Urban hospitals should reduce or reorganize their staffs to reduce their costs and improve quality service. A reduction in cost along with an improvement in public perception will help public hospitals compete.

Fifth: Federal and state governments should give Medicare and Medicaid

subsidies to hospitals based on their service to the poor and uninsured.

Sixth: Federal and state governments should establish a way to monitor the care given by urban public hospitals.

Public hospitals today are suffering from a condition that, if left untreated, may prove fatal. The importance of their survival needs to be recognized and addressed.

If we lose these safety-net institutions, many people will no longer have access to any medical care. The health of the people who live in urban communities — the majority

of whom are African American, Hispanic and other minorities — depends on public hospitals remaining viable American institutions.

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