

The New York Times

U.S. Walks Out as Iran Leader Speaks

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR, 23 September 2010

UNITED NATIONS — President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran made a series of incendiary remarks in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on Thursday, notably the claim that the United States orchestrated the Sept. 11 attacks to rescue its declining economy, to reassert its weakening grip on the Middle East and to save Israel.

Those comments prompted at least 33 delegations to walk out, including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Costa Rica, all 27 members of the European Union and the union's representative, diplomats said.

The annual General Assembly started formally on Thursday, with scores of presidents, kings and ministers expected to address the gathering over the coming week. The speeches often fail to break new ground or lack electricity, so the occasional theatrics inevitably attract considerable attention.

Mr. Ahmadinejad rarely disappoints on that scale, although he seemed to go out of his way to sabotage any comments he made previously this week about Iran's readiness for dialogue with the United States. The theme of his often flowery speech was that the capitalist world order was collapsing and he cited three examples: the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, and the pressure on Iran over its nuclear program.

He said there were three theories about the origins of the Sept. 11 attacks, including "that some segments within the U.S. government orchestrated the attack to reverse the declining American economy and its grips on the Middle East in order also to save the Zionist regime."

The United States Mission to the United Nations swiftly issued a terse response. "Rather than representing the aspirations and goodwill of the Iranian people, Mr. Ahmadinejad has yet again chosen to spout vile conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic slurs that are as abhorrent and delusional as they are predictable," it said in a statement.

It was not the first time Mr. Ahmadinejad espoused the theory, but never before so publicly. "The majority of the American people as well as other nations and politicians agree with this view," he said.

In other fallout, Nick Clegg, Britain's deputy prime minister, will tell the General Assembly on Friday that he had been on the verge of welcoming progress toward renewed talks on Iran's nuclear program.

"But instead, once again, an issue of grave global concern has been overshadowed by the bizarre, offensive and attention-grabbing pronouncements by President Ahmedinejad from this podium yesterday," Mr. Clegg said in prepared remarks released in advance by the British Mission to the United Nations. "They deserve to do neither."

Mr. Ahmadinejad obviously delights in being provocative during his annual visit to the United Nations. He framed his comments about Sept. 11 as an examination of opinions, an approach he has used repeatedly in questioning the Holocaust.

But his assertion that the majority of Americans agree with him surely lacked any factual basis. As did his claim that reviving the American economy was the motive behind the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon; the United States economy declined significantly after the attacks. In his interviews with journalists, much like during his debates with opponents in the disputed Iranian presidential election last year, Mr. Ahmadinejad has often been accused of making up statements wholesale.

But analysts noted that his remarks should be viewed through the prism of domestic politics in Iran, where conservatives try to outflank him. They said that during a recent Friday prayer sermon, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati said that 84 percent of Americans believed their own government was behind the attacks.

Iran also cultivates an image as the voice of all Muslims in confronting the United States, and the idea that Americans rather than Islamic extremists carried out the 2001 attacks has long resonated among Arabs. "This is very helpful to Ahmadinejad's desire for greatness in the Arab world," said Ali Mirsepassi, a professor of Middle Eastern studies and sociology at New York University.

The other two theories on the attacks presented by Mr. Ahmadinejad were that terrorists who penetrated American security were responsible, and that terrorists carried out the attacks but then the American government took advantage of the situation. He even suggested that the United Nations create a fact-finding panel to study the theories.

Farideh Farhi, an Iran expert at the University of Hawaii, said, "Apparently now he has decided that by going to the core of American sensitivities — in the same way he did with Israel by questioning the legitimacy of that country's existence — he can continue to keep himself at the center of global attention while deflecting attention away from his dismal domestic record."

Mr. Ahmadinejad also lambasted those Americans who had threatened to burn the Koran. "The truth could not be burned," he said, hefting a green Koran aloft with his one hand and a black Bible with another, saying he respected both of them. "We should wisely avoid playing into the hands of Satan."

The other speeches Thursday followed more traditional lines, although not without moments of passion.

Prime Minister Wen Jiabao of China focused his speech exclusively on China's domestic accomplishments, with a brief global reference at the end when he suggested a vital, peaceful China was good for the world's peace and prosperity.

The speech, entitled "Getting to Know the Real China," lauded the country's economic progress while recognizing that it had a way to go with 150 million people still living in poverty. Mr. Wen said China was determined to forge even greater progress through education, science and technology.

The Turkish president, Abdullah Gul, endorsed American efforts to negotiate peace in the Middle East, but criticized Israel both for its presumed nuclear arsenal and for attacking a Turkish-organized humanitarian convoy at sea in May during which nine people were killed.

"We hope that this new engagement can take us closer to a viable and fair settlement," Mr. Gul said. "On the other hand, it would be very difficult to make progress toward permanent peace unless we put an end to the humanitarian tragedy in Gaza."

Mr. Gul called the attack a violation of international law, and he welcomed a report released Wednesday by United Nations Human Rights Council, which endorsed that viewpoint. President Bingu wa Mutharika of Malawi, speaking on behalf of the African Union, urged the General Assembly to defer for one year the war crimes charges brought by the International Criminal Court against President Omar Hassan al-Bashir of Sudan. He said that would avoid jeopardizing the outcome of a referendum scheduled for January on independence for southern Sudan.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 25, 2010

A headline on Friday with an article about an incendiary speech in the United Nations General Assembly by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran summarized his remarks about the Sept. 11 terror attacks incorrectly. In his speech, Mr. Ahmadinejad asserted various theories about the origin of the attacks, including the possibility that they had been planned by the United States. He did not say that the United States had planned the attacks.