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'Extraordinary man'

SYDNEY - IN THE days since Mr Barack Obama won an historic victory in the United States' presidential election, the world has presented him with a to-do list of astonishing proportions.

For starters, he has been asked to end wars, fix the global economy, rid the world of hunger, sort out the Middle East and save the planet from climate change.

Oh, and if he can make the US a more civilised place with less of the aggression and swagger that accompanied his predecessor's administration, that would be appreciated too.

Almost as surprising as the weight of expectations on Mr Obama's thin shoulders is the fact that a lot of people around the world, including cold-eyed academic analysts, believe he has a chance of meeting at least some of them.

'Given the sky high expectations on Mr Obama, no mortal, no matter how far above the water he walks, could meet all those expectations,' Mr Geoffrey Garrett, head of the University of Sydney's US Studies Centre, told wires agencies.

'But let's say Mr Obama meets the expectations on him 50 to 75 per cent, that would still be an extraordinary achievement - and I think he has got it in him.'

Among the unprecedented challenges facing Mr Obama, the top two are the US-led meltdown in the global economy and the so-called war on terrorism.

'Extraordinary times require extraordinary leadership - and sometimes give birth to extraordinary leadership,' said Mr Garrett.

'The optimistic rendering would say Mr Obama really is a once-in-a-generation politician. The world today calls for once-in-a-generation leadership and he can provide it.'

When Mr Obama takes office on January 20 - as what one Australian newspaper called 'commander-cool-in-chief' after he was pictured emerging from a gym in cap and shades - he will inherit two wars of his own.

He has pledged to withdraw US forces from Iraq over a period of 16 months while boosting military efforts in the other war in Afghanistan.

But President Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo also wants him to help end the bloodshed in the tortured central African nation, which is caught in the latest of a string of conflicts since the mid-1990s.

'I look forward to working with you to restore peace and stability to DRC,' Mr Kabila said in a congratulatory message to Mr Obama.

He has also been called on to end a war before it begins, after his predecessor President George W. Bush made it clear that military action against Iran was an option if the Islamic state pursued nuclear weapons.

'You know the opportunities bestowed upon people by God are short-lived,' Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said in his message to Mr Obama.

'I hope you make the most of the chance of service and leave a good name by preferring people's real interests and justice to the insatiable demands of a selfish and indecent minority.'

With congratulatory messages forming a seemingly endless plea for help - like messages in bottles from islands around the world - the head of the UN food agency urged Mr Obama to make a priority of helping to end world hunger.

He should convene a summit on food security next year with the aim of reaching 'a wide and common consensus on the definitive elimination of hunger from the world,' FAO chief Jacques Diouf said in a congratulatory message.

In every corner of the world, there is a problem waiting to be solved and not only leaders but newspapers around the globe have looked to Mr Obama for leadership.

At the same time, many stressed that hopes for the Obama presidency may be too high.

The weight of expectation that rests today on the frame of a 47-year-old senator with no real executive experience is too great for one man and, in all probability, too large for one term of office,' said Britain's Guardian.

'The hopes that he has raised are so strong that disappointment will be his biggest enemy from day one,' wrote France's Liberation.

Kenya's top-selling Daily Nation, however, had no such doubts about the ability of the son of a Kenyan father and a white American mother to help the troubled continent.

'Africa does not expect to conduct business as usual in Washington. There is a lot that is wrong with America, the world and with the relationship between the two,' it said.

Mr Obama made overhauling US foreign policy a cornerstone of his election bid, and no corner of the world occupies a more important place in Washington's world view than the Middle East.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas has called on him to 'speed up efforts to achieve peace' in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But he may be forced to put Mideast peace on the backburner for several months, analysts said, because of Israeli elections set for Feb 10.

So, maybe a bit of a breather there for the incoming Superman - as he has been portrayed in posters - and the chattering classes of the world may even cut him a little more slack.

'There is a lot of international goodwill for Mr Obama that he can trade off in the first six to 12 months, which is when he has got to start to kick some goals in the foreign policy arena,' said international security analyst Alan Dupont.

'Obama is a man I think most people would say holds out the most promise of a really effective, potentially great leader, certainly going back for many decades.'

'But the bottom line is we don't know how he's going to turn out because he hasn't taken up the job,' Mr Dupont, director of the Centre for International Security Studies at the University of Sydney, told the wires.

If he does fail to live up to expectations, however, the world has nobody to blame but itself.

'The whole world, we knew in advance, would have voted for Obama four to one over (Republican candidate John) McCain,' said the US Studies Centre's Mr Garrett. -- AFP

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