

Remarks by President Obama after Bilateral Meeting with Italian Prime Minister Monti
Oval Office

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, hello, everybody. Benvenuto. I want to welcome Prime Minister Monti to the White House for his first visit. I had the opportunity to congratulate him after he took on the extraordinary responsibilities that he has accepted.

I want to begin by saying that it's nice to be able to return the hospitality of the Italian people. Every time I've been to Rome and L'Aquila, the warmth that has been extended not just to me but to my family has been extraordinary. And obviously we have a deep and special connection with the Italian people. The Italian-American community here in the United States has had as much of an impact as any group within our country.

I personally cannot claim Italian ancestry -- although my name ends in a vowel -- (laughter) -- so sometimes I try to pretend.

The Prime Minister came in at a very difficult time in Italian politics and the Italian economy. And I just want to say how much we appreciate the strong start that he has embarked on and the very effective measures that he is promoting inside of Italy. You've already seen because of his stewardship and his experience and his knowledge of economics, that not only has he boosted confidence within Italy about a reform agenda, but he's also been able to generate confidence throughout Europe and in the marketplace that Italy has a plan that takes seriously its fiscal responsibilities, but also emphasizes the need for structural reforms that can promote growth.

And so one of the topics of our conversation obviously was my continuing to encourage the fine work that has already been done by the Prime Minister and to express our interest in doing whatever we can do to help stabilize the situation in the Eurozone, including something that we both agree on, which is the need for a stronger European firewall that will allow for a more stable path for repayment of debt, but also the promotion of a growth strategy within Europe, which is obviously important not only to Europe but the entire world economy, and to our economy back here in the United States of America.

In addition to all the burdens that he has economically, Prime Minister Monti also is the leader of one of our most important friends and allies when it comes to security issues. So I emphasized to him how much we appreciate the sacrifices and outstanding work that are made by Italian forces in Afghanistan, and we reaffirmed our commitment to the Lisbon schedule in which we transition to full Afghan lead by the end of 2014.

I emphasized the fact that we could not have been successful in our Libya campaign without the extraordinary contributions of our Italian partners, and we both expressed our interest in working with the transitional government there to create a stable pathway towards democracy and economic prosperity.

We discussed the extraordinary efforts that Italian forces have taken in Kosovo to continue to maintain the peace there and to deal with ongoing tensions. And we discussed a wide range of diplomatic concern, including the situation in Syria, where we both have a great interest in ending the outrageous bloodshed that we've seen and seeing a transition from the current government that has been assaulting its people.

We also discussed how we can continue to encourage a peaceful and effective transition elsewhere in the Middle East. And we discussed the situation in Iran, and I thanked Italy for its participation in a strong sanctions regime. We also both said that we would work as hard as we can to find a diplomatic resolution to that very difficult situation.

So, overall, I think that the relationship between Italy and the United States has never been stronger. I personally have great confidence in the Prime Minister's leadership and his ability to navigate Italy through this difficult time, and to stabilize the economic situation there and then put it on a footing so that it can grow and prosper over the long term.

And I know given the extraordinary talents and gifts of the Italian people that, with these structural reforms, there's no reason why the future for Italy should not be extraordinarily bright.

So, Mr. Prime Minister, welcome. We thank you very much for your friendship, and we wish you the very best in the months to come.