

Big names, presidential hopefuls take center stage at Urban League Conference

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Some of the top contenders for the 2008 presidency were in St. Louis today (Friday) speaking at the National Urban League Conference.

Democratic presidential hopeful John Edwards on Friday chided rivals Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama for feuding over whether or not to meet with leaders of rogue nations, saying the spat was distracting Democrats from tackling real problems.

Neither Clinton nor Obama mentioned the flap as the leading Democratic contenders spoke one after another to roughly 1,400 people at the National Urban League's conference. Instead, they focused on domestic issues, chiefly early childhood education, health care and economic development for inner cities.

Sens. Clinton and Obama have engaged in a weeklong feud precipitated by Monday's debate exchange over whether a president should meet with leaders of rogue nations without preconditions.

"If you're looking for what's wrong in Washington, why the system is broken, why the system doesn't work, one perfect example is what's been happening just over the course of the last four days," said Edwards, who spoke before Clinton and Obama.

"We've had two good people -- Democratic candidates for president -- who spent their time attacking each other instead of attacking the problems that this country is facing," Edwards said to a mixture of groans and applause.

"I got your attention with that one," he added.

Democratic Rep. Dennis Kucinich also addressed the crowd, but no Republicans spoke to the conference.

The leading Democrats all endorsed the National Urban League's 10-point "opportunity compact," topped by support for mandatory early childhood education beginning as young as age 3 and guaranteed access to college for all.

Clinton outlined what she described as a "youth opportunity agenda," pledging if elected as president "to focus like a laser on those earliest years." She especially highlighted the plight of young black males, pledged to expand programs that send nurses into the homes of new parents and promised to spend \$100 million over five years to match students with internships at businesses.

"After all these years, I still believe it takes a village to raise a child," Clinton said.

Obama proposed to expand nationally a program similar to one in Harlem, N.Y., that offers childcare, after-school programs, free medical care and guidance counseling to children and their parents.

"The Harlem children's zone is saving a generation of children for \$46 million a year," Obama said. "That's about what we're paying for four hours of Iraq. Our priorities are skewed, and we're going to have to change them."

He also supported the creation of a special "inner city bank" -- similar to the urban infrastructure bank in the National Urban League's platform -- that could help rebuild rundown areas and jump-start small businesses.

Edwards and Kucinich both took aim at health insurance and pharmaceutical companies as they touted universal health care plans. Edwards said he met a man in the Virginia Mountains who couldn't afford to fix his cleft palate -- and thus was unable to talk -- until he was 50 years old.

"When are we going to stand up to these insurance companies and drug companies who are running this country?" Edwards rhetorically asked the crowd. "I am outraged at what is happening in the United States of America."

Kucinich emphasized his plan to provide to provide health care to all through a single-payer, nonprofit system.

Previously at the convention, there were speeches and appearances by some leading national figures, including New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton and the CEO of the National Urban League, Marc Morial.



Illinois Senator Barack Obama makes his address during a candidates forum given by the National Urban League during the organizations national convention in St. Louis, Mo. Friday. In the background is National Urban League President Marc Morial and journalist and moderator George Curry. Photo by Wiley Price/ St. Louis American Newspaper