

Schakowsky leaves Convention to confer with UN's Annan

BY LLOYD H. WESTON - Pioneer Press

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BOSTON -- Even at a national political convention, some things are more important than politics.

At least that's how U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, of Evanston, saw it last week when - less than a day after her arrival here for the 2004 Democratic National Convention - she joined fellow Congressman Donald M. Payne of New Jersey on a brief flight to the United Nations in New York.

The pair attended a hastily-arranged meeting with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to discuss the crisis in the Darfur region, Sudan, where more than 30,000 Sudanese have been slaughtered this year. Last week the Senate passed a resolution urging the UN to stop the killings.

Schakowsky said more than one million people are now at risk of death, as a result of the government-sponsored genocide.

"Some issues transcend the regular business of legislatures and political parties," she said in an interview at the Illinois delegation's convention headquarters upon her return to Boston. "This is one of those issues that stands above even the important business of policymaking ... above partisan politics, and moves into the realm of moral imperative," she said.

"The genocide that is occurring at this moment in Sudan - the murder and rape of women and even little girls, is one of those moral imperatives."

She and Payne told Annan how much the Senate resolution meant to their constituents and the country as a whole. "We urged him to direct the UN to abide by the resolution and put a stop to this genocide on the African continent," she said. "If it is in our power to prevent much, even if not all, of the loss of life, and we do not act -- then we share in the blame."

With her mission of mercy behind her, Schakowsky easily moved back into convention mode.

"This convention is about revving-up the troops," she said. "It's about talking points. There's a lot of passion in the country that says we need to get rid of (George W.) Bush, but not a lot of information about why we should elect (John) Kerry."

Despite old Republican slogans to the contrary, Schakowsky says it is the Democratic Party that "is the 'big tent.' We believe in the things everybody can relate to. We need to give that voice to the campaign to win the election."

The 9th District - encompassing some of both the most liberal and most conservative precincts in the state - runs from Evanston through Maine Township, along the Gold Coast of Chicago and the city's multi-ethnic West Rogers Park neighborhood. Facing only token opposition to her own reelection, Schakowsky is offering her resources and her staff to Democratic women in other Congressional races, including Christine Cegelis in the 6th District (running again U.S. Rep. Henry J. Hyde) and Melissa Bean in the 8th (running against U.S. Rep. Phil Crane.)

In addition, since Illinois seems to have already been ceded to Kerry by both political parties, Schakowsky is taking advantage of Illinois' strategic position, surrounded by "battleground" states. She is organizing weekend forays into Wisconsin, Michigan, Iowa and Missouri to help register voters and to campaign for Democratic candidates.

Echoing the campaign themes heard in speeches daily during the convention, Schakowsky puts schools, health and jobs at the top of her platform.

"Every school district I visit tells me that they can't afford 'No Child Left Behind;' the unfunded mandates - especially in this economic downturn," she said.

In addition, "there are a lot of people in Maine Township - everywhere in the state - who don't have health insurance ... many others who don't qualify for the new Medicare prescription benefits."

Schakowsky says "we need a President who cares about people, and who cares about our educational, economic and health issues as well."