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Obama not to blame for AIDS funding crisis, says Clinton

VIENNA: Former US president Bill Clinton Monday waded into a mounting controversy about funding at the world AIDS conference, defending Barack Obama from activists' claims he reneged on a campaign pledge.

Clinton laid the blame for financial belt-tightening at the door of the US Congress, lauded Obama for honouring his promises and urged campaigners to be smarter and more efficient in how they spent their own money.

"You have two options here, you can demonstrate and call the president names or we can go get some more votes in Congress to get some more money," Clinton said in a speech to the 18th International AIDS Conference.

"My experience is that the second choice is a better one and far likelier to play off. There is no way the White House will veto an increase in funding for AIDS."

The six-day world AIDS forum kicked off on Sunday to rowdy protests gathering several hundred activists, some of whom chanted "Obama lies — people die," as new data pointed to a slump in AIDS funding.

In Sunday's opening ceremonies, UN

Secretary General Ban Ki-moon warned in a video message that the "significant progress" in the 29-year war on AIDS could be reversed if countries retreated in their funding efforts.

In speeches, veteran campaigners demanded political leaders fund AIDS with the same speed and generosity as they refloated the banking sector in 2008 and shored up the Greek economy earlier this year.

President Obama has submitted a 2011 fiscal year request of 5.7 billion dollars for spending on AIDS, almost unchanged from last year and just 236 million dollars more than 2009, the last fiscal year of the George W. Bush administration, according to analysis by the US anti-AIDS organisation amfAR. Other donations are intended for the Global Fund and for tackling health problems that are connected with AIDS.

Critics say the trend is falling dismally short of Obama's campaign promise to spend some 50 billion dollars on AIDS by 2013.

But Clinton said Obama's 2011 request reflected the spending line taken in Congress, and pointed to the administration's many other achievements at a time of economic crisis.

"I completely understand why the advocates for greater AIDS funding have loudly protested. But I do not think it is either fair or accurate to say the president has gone back on his promises as if this was a callous walking away," said Clinton.

"When he signed that petition saying he

would support greater AIDS funding, it was before the American economy led the world into the worst financial crisis since the depression. Since then, he has tried to keep his commitments... even his worst critics admit that he tries to keep his commitments, that's why they don't like him." — AFP

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