

Barack Obama vows active role in 2016 presidential race

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Washington: President Barack Obama closed his next-to-last year in office with rare praise for congressional Republican leaders who helped orchestrate a bipartisan budget deal Friday, then vowed to work hard to beat the GOP and get a fellow Democrat elected to succeed him in the White House.

"I do want to thank Congress for ending the year on a high note," Obama said in his annual year-end news conference. He singled out former House Speaker John Boehner for kick-starting the budget process shortly before leaving Congress and gave current Speaker Paul Ryan "kudos" for seeing the effort through.

The budget package, which staved off a government shutdown and extended tax cuts for families and businesses, was finalized shortly before Obama addressed reporters in the White House briefing room Friday afternoon. The president quickly signed the measure into law.

The fiscal agreement capped a year of milestones for the president — including a historic Iranian nuclear accord, a sweeping Asia-Pacific trade pact and a global climate agreement — that have been overshadowed in recent weeks by deadly attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, heightening Americans' fears of terrorism.

Obama was stopping in San Bernardino late Friday to meet with families of the 14 victims on his way to Hawaii for his annual two-week Christmas vacation in his home state. The California attack by a married couple has raised concerns about the reach of the Islamic State and other terror groups.

Much of the president's focus was on outlining plans for his final year in office. The race to succeed him is well underway and will consume even more of the public's attention once primary voting begins in February.

While Obama was sidelined by his party in the 2014 midterm elections, he made clear he plans to play a robust role in the 2016 campaign. He said he expected Democrats to nominate a strong candidate, though he did not publicly side with front-runner Hillary Clinton or top challenger Bernie Sanders.

"I think I will have a Democratic successor," Obama said. "And I will campaign very hard to make that happen."

Bowing to the realities of an election year, the president outlined a limited legislative agenda for next year. He called on lawmakers to find areas of common ground on issues including criminal justice reform and final passage of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, both of which have some Republican support.

Still, Obama indicated he would continue to be aggressive in using executive authorities to act when stymied by Congress. He's working on a package of gun control measures that could include an expansion of background checks, and he didn't rule out the possibility of acting alone to shut down the Guantanamo Bay detention center.

"In 2016, I'm going to leave it all out on the field," he said. "Wherever there's an opportunity, I'm going to take it."

The president said he would make a determination on using executive action to shutter Guantanamo only after testing Congress' willingness to act on a closure plan he will release early next year. The plan has been long-delayed, and there's little expectation Republicans will drop their opposition to closing the prison.

Obama predicted the prison population would dwindle by early next year to less than 100, a threshold his administration

has been pushing for to bolster its argument that keeping the facility open isn't cost effective.

Much of the president's final year in office is likely to focus on the campaign against the Islamic State group, which has destabilized Iraq and Syria while increasingly setting its sights on Western targets. Obama has faced withering criticism from Republicans, as well as some Democrats, for taking a cautious approach to fighting the extremistsÂ Â an approach he defended again Friday.

"There's only so much bombing you can do," he said.

Obama also reiterated his belief that the anti-Islamic State campaign must be combined with diplomatic efforts to force Syrian President Bashar Assad from power. U.N. Security Council members on Friday unanimously approved a resolution endorsing a peace process for Syria, including a cease-fire and talks between the Damascus government and the opposition, though the agreement made no mention of Assad.

Obama called for Assad to leave power in 2011, but the Syrian leader has managed to hang on. The president defended his decision to call for regime change, saying he knew at the time that Syria would descend into chaos if Assad stayed in power.

"Five years later, I was right," Obama said.

But when asked whether Assad's presidency might outlast his own, the president demurred.

- AP