Barack Obama delivered his historic inaugural address on Tuesday after being sworn in as president of the United States.

"So to all the other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capital to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend to each nation and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are ready to lead once more," he said.

Much of what Obama said during his speech addressed Finnish concerns, such as America’s treatment of detainees, military involvements, the economy and the restoration of fractured international relationships.

Obama rejected that a choice must be made between safety and ideals, probably signalling that questionable activities like the Guantanamo Bay detentions would be ceased. He also announced that America would “responsibly leave Iraq to its people and forge a hard-earned peace in Afghanistan.”

The new president promised to “roll back the spectre of a warming planet” and pledged to support clean technologies, industries and sustainable energies.

Barack Obama: “We are ready to lead once more”

DAVID J. CORD

Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States in front of an estimated crowd of two million people. Millions more around the world watched the event live on television or on the internet.

The new president’s inaugural address was given in his soaring rhetorical style that has drawn comparisons to the likes of Cicero and Martin Luther King Jr. While most of the speech was aimed at Obama’s domestic audience, a portion was also directed at the rest of the world.

“Today, I stand in front of an American arsenal, a portion was also directed at the rest of the world."

Reduced waiting times for Finnish citizenship

The Finnish Immigration Service expects that the processing speed for citizenship applications will be greatly accelerated in 2009. In the past the agency had been labouring under a huge number of applications for citizenship, but the resolution of all the old cases should ease the process for new applicants.

A number of measures have been taken in recent years to work through the backlog. In 2004 the agency had about 6,000 naturalisation applications under consideration while the average length of time for a decision was around two and a half years. At that time about 20 workers were transferred from the refugee and asylum section of the agency to the citizenship section to help with the enormous workload.

By 2008 the average waiting time for a decision was down sharply to about one and a half years. "The average waiting time for those who received a decision last year was 550 days," says Director Kristiina Simonen. "The queues were very long, with some cases awaiting processing since 2003."

Now this backlog has been cleared and persons applying for Finnish citizenship will probably receive a decision sooner. The Finnish Immigration Service is now working on the remaining applications from the dating back to 2006, and they are confident these will be fully processed by the end of April. “The waiting time should shorten considerably,” she says.

The agency is expected to have to deal with an increase in asylum applications in the coming months. This is unlikely to have any effect on the waiting time for decisions on citizenship however, as the citizenship unit is run separately from the refugee and asylum section of the Finnish Immigration Service.

Simonen points out that the easiest cases went through the citizenship process much faster last year. "In the clearest cases, where everything was in order and there was no investigative work, a decision was reached in 76 days on average," she explains.

For those planning on applying for Finnish citizenship, Simonen recommends that they have all their required documentation in order. If necessary papers such as language certificates are missing, processing cannot be gone ahead with until all the mandatory requirements are met. If a person does not meet the request within a stipulated time period, his or her application risks being rejected.

The Finnish Immigration Service announced that last year over 3,300 citizenship applications were received and 2,449 decisions were handed down.
Reversed cross-border shopping

The financial crisis and the weak Norwegian currency has turned cross-border shopping between Norway and neighbouring states Sweden and Finland upside down, writes the Barents Observer.

“TRADITIONALLY, Norwegians in the northern part of the country have travelled to Finland to buy petrol, meat, alcoholic beverages and tobacco. Now, when the Norwegian kroner is weak against the euro, the Finns are coming in great numbers to Northern Norway to buy cheap foodstuffs.”

“The exception of tobacco and alcohol, most commodities are cheaper to buy in Norway than in Finland these days.”

In the Finnish town of Karigasniemi..."Triplets, rubber shoes are existing hard times. Some firms have had a drop in turnover on 20-35 per cent.”

Scientist wins Nokia award

Nokia Foundation awarded a Singapore researcher writes The Straits Times.

“A LEADING Singapore researcher who specialises in improving the way people and computers communicate with each other has been picked by the Nokia Foundation to work and lecture in Finland.

“Dr Li Haizhou, who heads the Institute for Informa Re- search...”

New coin commemorates Sweden’s loss of Finland

Sweden mark bicentenary of Finland’s sepa- ration with a special coin, reports The Local.

“ON SEPTEMBER 17th, 1809, Sweden reluctantly relinquished control of the terri- tories it held in present day Finland...”

“Mark the anniversary of the separation, all Swed- ish krona coins minted in 2009 will carry a special de- sign on the reverse composed by Swedish designer...”

The coin itself will actual- ly be produced by the Mint of Finland.”

The most Finnish city in the US celebrates all things Finnish during their Heipapäivä festival, reports the Detroit Free Press.

“IF YOU spend any part of this week shopping at the heipor, checking out at the seiso- vopitä and generally living it up at Heipapäivä, there is only one place in the plan- et you could be: Hancock, the Finnish capital of Michigan — if not the nation.”

“Hancock is so Finnish that the city's street signs will read not just ‘Quincy’ (the main avenue) but also ‘Vattakatu,’ its Finnish counterpart. Han- dock is home to Finland- University and the Finnish American Reporter, a month- ly newspaper distributed in all 50 states and eight countries, including New Zealand, Namibia and yes, Finland.”

“It's just a lot of fun,” says Jim Kurtti, director of the Finnish American Heritage Center at Finlandia Univer- sity and editor of the Finn- ish American Reporter. “You think of the Finns and non- Finnish people really enjoying the music and different food and the whole event.”

The event includes boot- throwing and wife-carry- ing contests, a viper’s nest or whip-sled that turns in circles and an outdoor Polar Bear Dive into icy waters for the brave and insane.”

“The festival draws a few thousand people each year.”

“’There's this thing,’ says Debbie Kurtti, called adult- onish Finnishness. People are learning Finnish and going to Finnish festivals and meeting other Finns and doing genealogy. Peo- ple now are proud of their heritage.”

The viipukelkka is one of the old Finnish activities the people of Hancock can enjoy during their Heipapäivä festival.

The viipukelkka is a game played on a local ice pond in Hancock, Michigan. Participants use an ice pick to break the ice of the pond, and then throw a rock into the middle of the pond. The object of the game is to break as many holes as possible in the ice before the end of the game. The game is typically played in the winter months, especially during the holidays.