

Obama, Clintons converge on civil rights shrine

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By John Whitesides, Political Correspondent

SELMA, Alabama (Reuters) - Democratic rivals Barack Obama and Hillary Rodham Clinton, joined by former President Bill Clinton, descended on a hallowed shrine of the civil rights movement on Sunday to court black voters who could help pick the party's 2008 presidential nominee.

At a day-long series of events in the small town of Selma, Alabama, the trio of political stars celebrated the 42nd anniversary of the 1965 civil rights march and said the heroes of "Bloody Sunday" had set the stage for their landmark runs for the White House.

"I stand on the shoulders of giants," Obama, who hopes to become the first black president, said at a packed ceremony in the AME church used as a headquarters by civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King. "I'm here because somebody marched for freedom."

Clinton, in a simultaneous speech in a packed Baptist church less than a block away, said the voting rights won after the march had helped fuel her campaign to be the first woman president, as well as the runs by Obama and New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson, who would be the first Hispanic president.

"I know where my chance came from, and I am grateful," Clinton said. "The people of Selma understood that voting matters."

Both services ended with the candidates linking arms with the other speakers and joining the audience in singing the hymnal and civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome."

The two candidates then joined former President Clinton and thousands of others in walking across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where state troopers in 1965 violently attacked black marchers in a confrontation that drew national attention and helped lead to passage of voting rights legislation.

Crowds of onlookers pressed against the marchers and thronged the route. Obama and the Clintons marched at different ends of the same line, but had a brief conversation during the march.

INTENSE RIVALRY

The early campaign collision between Hillary Clinton and Obama, the top two contenders for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, is another sign of the budding intensity of their rivalry and the importance of their duel for black votes in the early primaries.

Obama had been scheduled to give the keynote address at the ceremonies for weeks. Clinton, refusing to cede any black support to Obama, decided to attend as well.

Both candidates said the march should be seen as a beginning to the work needed to build America, and the two rivals praised each other at a rally outside the AME church before the march stepped off.

"I think it is so exciting that we have a candidate for president like Barack Obama who embodies all that was done right here 42 years ago," Hillary

Clinton said.

Obama said he was glad Clinton is "here with us marching arm in arm. We don't have the time for other folks to distract us."

Bill Clinton will receive a civil rights award during ceremonies after the march in what will be his first campaign appearance with his wife since she entered the White House race in January.

The confluence of candidates, a former president, a host of other top political and civil rights figures and a swelling horde of media created a carnival atmosphere.

Obama's speech drew a packed crowd 400 people, with more than 1,000 others listening outside on loudspeakers. An overflow crowd at Clinton's speech watched on televisions in the church basement.

When Bill Clinton arrived dozens of people broke away from the crowd to chase his car down an alley.

Recent polls show Obama slicing Clinton's national lead and gaining ground among black voters as they become more familiar with the freshman Illinois senator. Clinton, a New York senator whose husband is hugely popular with black voters, had enjoyed big leads over Obama.

The event highlighted the potential importance of black voters, typically the most loyal Democratic constituency, in early 2008 primaries. In Alabama, which has not set a date for its primary but could hold it in early February 2008, blacks could constitute more than 40 percent of the total vote.

(Additional reporting by Verna Gates)

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