

Biden Treads Softly in Greece

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ATHENS — What do you do if you're a voluble American official, you're visiting the epicenter of Europe's debt crisis at the start of a crucial week for the euro, and you don't want to upset the olive cart?

If you're Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr., you say the right words, avoid the wrong ones and try to keep it light.

On Monday, as he greeted Greece's president, Karolos Papoulias, Mr. Biden introduced a member of his delegation, Christopher Smart. "This man represents the Treasury Department," said a deadpan Mr. Biden. "He's brought hundreds of millions of dollars."

His Greek hosts dissolved into laughter, and the vice president had cleared the first hurdle of the day, as Mr. Biden's aides steered him away from opportunities to rattle European nerves while its leaders were in sensitive debt negotiations.

Later, with Greece's new Prime Minister, Lucas Papademos, Mr. Biden offered a staunch show of American moral support for the country's efforts to climb out of its debt hole. His interim government, formed last month amid the mounting economic crisis, is drafting an austerity budget and negotiating the latest bailout with its creditors.

"It is a difficult time for Greece, and we stand ready to help in any way we can," Mr. Biden said. "It is overwhelmingly in the interest of the United States that Greece work its way through this financial crisis and remain a strong and vital part of the European Union."

The vice president praised Greece's efforts to abide by the conditions of the International Monetary Fund and the European Union, which are aiding Greece although with tough strings attached. But he said nothing about Europe's broader efforts to contain the crisis.

Mr. Papademos, a former central banker and American-trained economist who taught at Columbia University, said he was confident that the "U.S. will stand by it during these hard times."

The rub, of course, is that the United States does not plan to do a whole lot more than that. Mr. Biden did not come here with any offers of American aid, nor did the Greeks expect any.

A question now is whether the International Monetary Fund, in which the United States is the largest shareholder, will play a larger role in helping to stop the crisis from spreading to Italy or Spain, where borrowing costs are also soaring.

In an interview on Sunday, Mr. Biden confirmed discussions about the fund's role, but said, "That is not something it would be healthy or correct for me to speculate on as we go into this week."

Mr. Biden, whose loquacious style has occasionally landed him in trouble, spoke at length on this eight-day trip about the American withdrawal from Iraq and the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East. But he turned almost Delphic when asked about Europe's crisis.

"Look, I'm going to choose my words here because I don't want to," he said, before trailing off and staring for a long moment at the coffee table in his cabin on Air Force Two. "For a guy who doesn't own any stock, I don't want the market responding to me."

In Athens, Mr. Biden's schedule kept him out of the public eye. A planned wreath-laying was canceled and there were no news conferences or other public appearances. In Istanbul a day

earlier, Mr. Biden strolled through a neighborhood — buying fish, fruit and cheese, chatting with the locals and tossing a tangerine to a young boy.

The atmosphere here is less volatile than it has been in recent months. But on Monday, employees of the Greek state television service went on strike, which meant that the few images of Mr. Biden's visit were carried only on commercial television.

Mr. Biden noted that President Obama was sending Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner to Europe this week, and that America's role in the crisis was better addressed by him.

"You know, in the good old days when I was a senator, I was my own man," Mr. Biden said. "I could just tell you my views. But now whatever I say is attributed to the administration."

"I finally learned that," the vice president added. "It took me about six months, but I got it down."

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