

Antigua celebrates black achievement, names mountain Obama

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Antigua's highest mountain officially became "Mount Obama" on Tuesday as the small Caribbean nation celebrated the American president on his birthday and saluted him as a symbol of black achievement.

Prime

Minister Baldwin Spencer presided over the re-christening ceremony at the base of the mountain, unveiling a stone sculpture and plaque honoring the president as an inspiration in the twin-island nation of Antigua and Barbuda and throughout the Caribbean.

"This great

political achievement by Barack Obama resonated with me in a way that I felt compelled to do something symbolic and inspiring," Spencer told the crowd of about 300, including several U.S. officials, at the base of the mountain near the island's southern coast.

"As an

emancipated people linked to our common ancestral heritage and a history of dehumanizing enslavement, we need to at all times celebrate our heroes and leaders who through their actions inspire us to do great and noble things," Spencer said.

The plaque on the rock

sculpture at the base of the mountain reads: "Mount Obama, named in honor of the historical election on Nov. 4, 2008, of Barack Hussein Obama, the first black president of the United States of America, as a symbol of excellence, triumph, hope and dignity for all people."

Spencer

announced his intention to rename the mountain, previously known as Bogy Peak, shortly after the election. The gesture reflected the U.S. leader's widespread popularity in the country, where it is common to see Obama bumper stickers and T-shirts.

Still, there was some

criticism on talk radio and in the local newspapers. Lester Bird, leader of the opposition Antigua Labor Party, called the change "silly" and said they might as well name it for Michael Jackson. But parliament's approval was not required for the new name to take effect.

The

prime minister has also announced plans for Mount Obama to become a national park with a museum and other amenities. The tree-covered mountain has pineapple and mango farms at its base and rises about 1,300 feet (396 meters) along the island's southern coast. Its peak, topped with a radio antenna, offers views of the Caribbean Sea and the island of Montserrat and its active volcano in the distance.

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