

Ambassador Morningstar
Sheki Roundtable
October 8, 2012

Ambassador Morningstar: Good evening everybody and thank you for joining us tonight.

I'm very happy to be here in Sheki as is my wife Faith, who is over there. And if later you want to ask her any questions, feel free.

As many of you know, I have been to Azerbaijan many times over the last 17 years, but until coming here as Ambassador about five or six weeks ago, my trips have been limited to Baku and maybe two days at a time. So it's been a real privilege for my wife and me to be able to get to the regions. We arrived here in Sheki on Friday.

We met with the Deputy Head of the Executive Committee Mr. Hasanov on Friday. We also had the pleasure today of meeting with Mr. Garbanov who is the head of the Oguz Executive Committee and had enlightening conversations with both officials about Azerbaijan's northwestern region.

We've seen many of the beautiful sites of your region over the past couple of days and we've also had the opportunity to meet with many local people including our Local Peace Corps volunteers who we had dinner with on Friday night. I think the Peace Corps are doing several wonderful projects in the region that we can talk about if you'd like more later during your questions.

We've learned a lot. We participated and made halva at a workshop here in Sheki yesterday morning. I will say the halva that we made was very good. We also visited a metal working shop just up the street. We toured your wonderful Khan Palace yesterday -- truly magnificent. We had dinner last night with the Sheki Girls Club which is a local group which is in part funded by a grant from our embassy. It was particularly inspiring for Faith and me to meet some up and coming female leaders in the community.

Today we had an exceptional experience. We went to Oguz where there was a regional softball tournament that was sponsored by our Peace Corps volunteers and by the Oguz Executive Committee. Softball is like baseball. I actually participated as the umpire in a couple of games. It was a good thing that we had to leave in the middle of the second game to meet Mr. Garbanov because I think I was making some bad decisions as the umpire at that point.

After this meeting we'll be going to see about 150 young people nearby. From all of our experiences we've been tremendously expressed with the young people here in the region because it's the youth that's the future of Azerbaijan. I think that with these young people the future of U.S.-Azerbaijan relations are in good hands.

We've been very busy since we've been in Azerbaijan. I handed my credentials to President Aliyev about five weeks ago tomorrow. We've been meeting with official and private Azerbaijanis and I've been learning more and more about your country. Our bilateral relationship I think is very strong and it's also complex. We work together on a lot of issues that include regional stability, democracy and human rights, counter-terrorism, energy security, as well as the overall development of Azerbaijan's economy beyond energy.

So again, Faith and I want to thank Sheki and all the people of Sheki and Oguz for their wonderful hospitality. I'll be happy to answer any of your questions.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. First of all, Mr. Ambassador, I would like to thank you for coming to this interview with us. My question would be what so far has been the most remarkable or unforgettable memory in Sheki for you?

Ambassador Morningstar: There have been two types of memories I think that both Faith and I will remember very much. I think the most unforgettable memory is the experience we've had in talking to young people, the youth, both boys and girls; meeting with women and hearing a lot of what their concerns are; and the overall warmth and hospitality of the people here in Sheki.

The other type of memory that we'll always remember is just the pure physical beauty of this part of the country. It was particularly highlighted I think yesterday

which may have been one of the most beautiful days that I can ever remember. The mountains were absolutely magnificent. The sights also, as I mentioned before, were fantastic. I think the Khan Palace was just so beautiful, both on the outside and on the inside. And when you looked closely at the paintings on the inside of the palace, it's remarkable how those paintings reflected life here in Sheki at the time the palace was built, but also today as well.

We were also particularly impressed by the -- which I did not mention earlier -- the beautiful Albanian church and the wonderful garden outside of the church in Kich.

The highlights were meeting the people, and I mentioned the youth and the women. Also, for example, the person who we met, the people who were working in the halva shop, all of them just so warm and hospitable, and then also the beautiful sights. I also shouldn't forget the person who makes the metal boxes who followed the tradition from his own family.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. Mr. Ambassador, your visit to Sheki coincided with the remarkable event, I mean Second International Humanitarian Forum in Baku. And I would like to get your opinion, your elaboration on the importance of that event.

By the way, I would like to add that today over 100 participants of the forum visited Sheki.

Ambassador Morningstar: I attended the Humanitarian Forum on Thursday, I believe. I think the forum was extremely important because it reflected the growing importance of Azerbaijan on the world stage. It also I think reflected the importance of democracy and human rights and humanitarian activities in Azerbaijan as well as in the rest of the world.

I think that this was extremely important for the government of Azerbaijan to stress these activities. As you know, President Aliyev made the keynote speech on Thursday. By stressing democratic and human values I think that Azerbaijan with its huge economic resources can become a leading country both in the region and beyond this region.

The many leaders who attended this forum, many former presidents and prime ministers, was really a very impressive group. It was very important and I'm happy that they all got a chance to come and see Sheki because it's such a beautiful place.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. First of all let me congratulate you, Mr. Ambassador, on your assignment to Azerbaijan. You are welcome to Sheki. It is very gratifying that you have visited the northwestern region of Azerbaijan.

I would like to know which other regions of Azerbaijan you are interested in to visit.

Ambassador Morningstar: First let me say we've only been here for now it will be six weeks on Tuesday. We also had a very wonderful visit a couple of weeks ago to Lankaran. A very different region than Sheki, but at the same time the people greeted us with tremendous warmth and hospitality.

We had a chance to attend a football match between the United States and France which was part of the Under 17 Women's World Cup Football Championships that were hosted by Azerbaijan.

We also met, again, many citizens of Lankaran and had the same reaction as to how impressive they were.

As far as the remaining areas of Azerbaijan, there are still many that we want to go to and we will try to go to as many regions as possible.

I want to emphasize that I am the Ambassador to more than just Baku. I am the United States Ambassador to all of Azerbaijan. I want to see as much of it as possible.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. First of all I would like to greet you here, and say we are glad to see you here, Mr. Ambassador.

We know you have familiarized yourself with the history and culture and people of our region. My question will be what are the similarities and differences between Americans and Azerbaijanis, to your mind.

Ambassador Morningstar: To me there are more similarities than differences. Again, last night we met with girls and women who ranged in age between 13 and older women who were already in their 40s. Today we met with probably 70 or 80 softball players, both boys and some girls. In my time already in Baku and my trip to Lankaran we've probably met with several hundred youth and also we'll be meeting again with 150 or so in a few minutes. I think that the youth in Azerbaijan, young men and young women, all want the same thing as young Americans want. All young Americans and all young Azerbaijanis want a future where they have opportunities to succeed in areas that they want to work in. They want to be able to have an education and they want to have happy families that are the center of their lives. As long as the youth, both in the United States and Azerbaijan and in other countries as well, have those opportunities I think that our societies will be very successful.

When I came to Baku between 1995 and prior to becoming Ambassador I came here and worked mostly in the energy area. I haven't had the chance to meet the large number of Azerbaijanis that I am now able to meet. But because of those meetings I have huge confidence in the future of Azerbaijan.

Media: [Through Interpreter]. My question will be about the recent release of the movie made in the United States titled "Innocence of Muslims" I would like to get the reaction, attitude of the official United States to this movie, to this film.

Ambassador Morningstar: I can give you the official reaction of the United States as well as my own reaction.

First of all let me emphasize that the United States through its Constitution has a long tradition of tolerance of all religions and respect for all religions. Everybody in the United States is free to practice any religion that they wish.

As far as the film that you're referring to, I think that both President -- I know that both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have said that the film is disgusting and detestable and reprehensible, which I certainly strongly agree with. But I would also have to say, as both the President and Secretary of State have said, that no film, no words should justify violence. President Obama even said in his speech to the United Nations that people call him all sorts of terrible things, people in the press, private individuals, whatever, oftentimes call him very bad things. People on blog sites as well have said bad things about a lot of people. But as President Obama said, these are words and there's nothing he can do about that.

So again, the film was just disgusting, but films should not justify violence. I'll leave it at that.

Thank you very much.

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