

American

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President Obama Praises Shift in Chinese Currency Exchange Policy

More flexible yuan will help balance the global economy, president says

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The Obama administration welcomed China's decision to allow its currency, the yuan, to have more flexible exchange rates by allowing several foreign currencies to determine its value, rather than pegging its exchange rate solely to the U.S. dollar.

"China's decision to increase the flexibility of its exchange rate is a constructive step that can help safeguard the recovery and contribute to a more balanced global economy," President Obama said in a June 19 statement. "I look forward to discussing these and other issues at the G20 Summit in Toronto next weekend," he added.

In July 2008, during the global economic slowdown, China fixed the value of the yuan to the dollar, which helped to protect its export market as global demand for consumer goods declined. But critics argued that the policy unnaturally undervalued the yuan, which made China's exports cheaper and gave Chinese companies an unfair advantage over their foreign competitors, which led to job losses outside China.

By including several other currencies besides the U.S. dollar to determine its value, the yuan is expected to grow stronger and be able to appreciate in value against the U.S. dollar.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, in a June 19 statement, urged "vigorous implementation" of China's more flexible currency policy. By doing so, China "would make a positive contribution to strong and balanced global growth," he said.

Geithner and other U.S. officials had been urging China to reform its exchange rate mechanism. At the conclusion of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue in Beijing May 25, Geithner said Chinese leaders had recognized that such changes constituted an important part of their country's broader economic reform agenda.

"Allowing the exchange rate to reflect market forces is important not just to give China the flexibility necessary to sustain more balanced economic growth with low inflation but also to reinforce incentives for China's private sector to shift resources to more productive higher-value-added activities that will be important to future growth," he said.

Speaking to reporters in Beijing June 21, U.S. Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman praised China's move as "a genuine attempt ... to address its exchange rate mechanism."

The Chinese decision "takes an irritant off the table in U.S.-China relations," Huntsman said, according to press reports.

He also said the increased ability of U.S. exports to compete with Chinese goods would help create critically needed jobs in the United States.

"When you start to consider that every billion dollars in exports creates 22,500 jobs, that's a very big deal at a time when we're facing high rates of unemployment," the ambassador said.

U.S., Russia Partner to Strengthen Emergency Disaster Management

FEMA works with EMERCOM on search-and-rescue procedures

By James E Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington — Despite occasional political differences, the United States and Russia continue to cooperate against a common enemy — natural and man-made disasters that threaten the political and economic well-being of all nations.

Earthquakes, floods, and terrorist acts are disasters that require emergency management, a major task the United States and Russia have been cooperating on for the past 14 years, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Director of International Affairs Carole Cameron recently told America.gov.

The official explained the U.S.-Russian partnership goes back to 1996, when the Joint U.S.-Russia Committee on Cooperation in Emergency Management was formed to share information and best practices on issues like search and rescue. The long-standing partnership is now an integral part of the U.S.-Russian Binational Commission established in 2009.

In late May, Cameron traveled with a team of FEMA disaster management experts to meet with Russian counterparts in Moscow at the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defense, Emergencies and Disaster Relief (EMERCOM).

She said the main focus of the Joint Committee gathering, led on the U.S. side by FEMA Deputy Administrator for Protection and Preparedness Timothy W. Manning, was to hold a joint "table top" exercise on disaster

management techniques that “will help Russia gain United Nations emergency response certification under the U.N. urban search-and-rescue program.”

Cameron explained a table top exercise is “where you compare and contrast what your policies and procedures are for managing emergency responses. This involves disaster response team transfer to the site, called deployment, technical and medical support of operations, coordination with local authorities and international organizations.

“The exercise was very successful,” she said, because “the Russian managers and their response teams were so highly skilled. But what also impressed me was to see how our management procedures were more alike than different. We do many things in the same way and some differently. For example, we seem to have similar logistical requirements, such as arranging local transportation, setting up base camps and integrating with the larger response operation; and both countries include a canine corps as part of the team.”

One difference is how quickly the teams can deploy, the U.S. official said. “We both know that we have to be at the disaster as quickly as possible. In the United States, our teams are local assets not owned by the federal government and therefore take time to organize for deployments both inside and outside the country. However, in Russia disaster response teams, while stationed throughout the nation, are national government assets managed from a centralized location in Moscow and therefore can deploy more quickly.”

Cameron said FEMA and EMERCOM management specialists also discussed the actions undertaken by the Russian rescue task force that responded to the August 2009 disaster at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydropower plant where a turbine broke apart, flooding the power station and killing 75 workers.

The U.S. official noted that future cooperative work involves a visit by FEMA Administrator W. Craig Fugate to Russia in July when discussions will include:

- Exchanging best practices in “mass event planning” to better ensure public safety at the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.
- Developing protocols to better coordinate response operations in a third country.
- Analyzing transportation requirements and techniques in disaster management planning.
- Focusing on children and how to better prepare them for disaster situations.

In addition to the table top exercise, which concluded with the signing of a 2010-2011 Protocol and Work Plan,

the FEMA team also visited EMERCOM’s new National Crisis Management Center in the suburbs of Moscow.

Iranian-American Summer Camp Builds Lasting Ties

Diverse camp focuses on community, connections for Iranian-American teens

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — The truth about Camp Ayandeh, as Ramin Bajoghli will tell you, is that it maybe doesn’t sound like the most fun an Iranian-American teenager could have during summer vacation.

Games, yes, but also lectures about cultural and academic topics. Workshops on team-building. A focus on issues as well as soccer.

“We only had 19 or 20 kids the first year, and all their parents forced them to come,” said Bajoghli, who was one of the organizers that year and, four years later, is head of the advisory board for the nonprofit group that runs the camp.

When the camp convenes for its fifth season in July, it will have its largest crowd yet, 85 campers, and — as usual — 60 to 70 percent will be returnees from past years. Bajoghli said that before organizers even decide each winter when the camp will open, they hear from families who want to know the schedule so they can register their teenagers. Most applications arrive well before the deadline. And the counselors, all unpaid, tend to be former campers.

“It’s not a boring camp,” he said.

The group that sponsors Ayandeh, Iranian Alliances Across Borders, with the help of a grant from the Parsa Community Foundation and other donations, was the creation in 2003 of Bajoghli’s sister Narges and her friend Nikoo Paydar, two college students near Boston, Massachusetts. They wanted an organization that could help members of the Iranian diaspora build communities, improve understanding of life in the Iranian diaspora and maintain ties with Iran. They also wanted to involve Iranian Americans even younger than college age, and Ramin Bajoghli said they asked their non-Iranian friends what had built their ethnic or national identity as kids. One answer: summer camp.

So Camp Ayandeh brings Iranian-American teenagers of high school age (the oldest campers are about to enter college) to one appealing spot or another for six days in summer. “The schedule is balanced out between fun, academics and community building,” Bajoghli said.

Although the campers are all Iranian American, he said their differences are substantial: "It's a very diverse community — politically, ethnically, religiously. ... We don't want to alienate anybody."

One of the more important differences among the teenagers is the extent of their ties to the larger Iranian-American community. Bajoghli said most come from areas with large concentrations of families from Iran, so those campers are accustomed to being around other teens who eat similar foods at home and celebrate the same holidays. The ones who have grown up a bit isolated from other Iranian Americans can be self-conscious about their culture and benefit from a few days with other boys and girls like themselves, he said.

In a group as focused on academic success as Iranian Americans, it's probably not surprising that each year at camp involves some effort to point campers toward college. One of the staff members is involved with a well-known company in the field of college preparation and educational testing, and she discusses different issues — how to prepare for college, how to select a college and how to succeed in the high-stress application process — with students of different ages.

But Bajoghli said the camp also hopes to expand the teenagers' intellectual boundaries and pique their interest in concerns about society, and he said it seems to be succeeding. He said many former campers become leaders of their college Iranian-American student groups or involved in other issues, and many choose such majors as sociology, psychology and political science. "In the Iranian-American community, it's hard to tell your parents that you don't want to be a doctor or an engineer," he said.

After four years at a variety of sites on the East Coast, Camp Ayandeh will go to the West Coast for the first time in 2010, on the campus of Notre Dame de Namur University in northern California. Bajoghli said the campers always have come from across the United States and have remained linked — by e-mail and on Facebook and other social sites — despite the distances. "It's created a network, which was one of the goals of the camp as well," he said.

The camp's success at building a community of young Iranian Americans will get a closer look this summer. One of last year's volunteer counselors, Neda Maghbouleh, is returning this year to do research on the subject for her doctoral degree in sociology.

Putting Up a Fight for a Free Press in India

A Gandhi grandson recalls when Indian journalists beat back censorship

By Jeff Baron
Staff Writer

Washington — Rajmohan Gandhi is preaching for press freedom and press responsibility. The freedom is vital in any democracy, he says, and the press has to work against threats to that freedom.

Gandhi is a grandson of Indian independence leader Mohandas K. Gandhi. His other grandfather, Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari, known as Rajaji, was also a leading figure in the independence movement. Gandhi has had a career as a democracy and peace activist, a member of India's parliament, a journalist, a historian and a biographer.

Since 1997, Gandhi has been a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's Center for South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies; his latest book, *A Tale of Two Revolts*, compares the Indian Revolt of 1857 with the American Civil War of 1861-1865. But in an appearance June 9 at the National Press Club in Washington, Gandhi focused on a more recent period of Indian history and the importance of the fight for a free press.

India has had a free and competitive press since independence in 1947, noted Myron Belkind, a longtime Associated Press correspondent and an officer of the press club, "with the exception of what is considered a dark period." From June 1975 to March 1977, the government of then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a state of emergency that severely curtailed press freedom, among other issues.

Belkind, who covered India during the emergency, added, "Despite that clampdown, many Indian journalists continued to do their best to fulfill their professional obligations in the face of threats and imprisonment from the government." And Rajmohan Gandhi was among them, he said.

Gandhi (no relation to Indira Gandhi) recalled that the state of emergency was set off by a court challenge that arose after the prime minister's election in 1971. A state court ruled that her election was illegal, and the Supreme Court of India put off a decision until it could hear the case in its fall term, saying the prime minister could remain in that office in the meantime but could not be a member of parliament.

Press freedom was quickly curtailed once the emergency order was signed, he said. "In the middle of the night, the printing presses of the newspapers in New Delhi were all switched off; there was no electricity sent to them. There

is one street in New Delhi which has 10 major newspapers, so the electric connection for all those buildings was removed. In the middle of the night, several hundred political figures, members of parliament, were arrested. In the subsequent days, thousands of people were arrested, and censorship was imposed," he said.

Under the first phase of censorship, "everything that was to be published in newspapers had to be approved by a censor." That proved unmanageable, Gandhi said. Pre-publication reviews were removed, but "a great many newspapers just succumbed" to the continued strict guidelines about what could or could not be printed, he said.

Others, though, chose to fight the censorship. "Quite a few people in different parts of India played this type of a role – in the large newspapers, but of course, as you can imagine, it was somewhat easier to do this if you had a smaller newspaper," Gandhi said.

Gandhi's newspaper, a weekly named Himmat that he and some friends had founded, was one such paper. "We decided that we would as far as possible defy the law, as far as possible out-trick the censors and then fight the way we could," he said. "When it appeared that the removal of pre-censorship gave us more opportunities, we took those opportunities and published quite freely."

Defying the government came with costs. Air India, then a government-owned company, had advertised in Himmat every week since its first issue, but it and several banks cut off their advertising. The newspaper also lost its printing contractor. Gandhi, editor of the Himmat, was also targeted: "I was asked to pay a large fine, which I refused to pay," he said.

The defiant press even worked to Indira Gandhi's benefit, he said. "Different people from all over the world would visit India and call on the prime minister, and they would all ask about the emergency, the lack of democracy in India," he said. "So she would pull out of her top drawer two or three copies of journals like Himmat to show how free the press in India was."

When Indira Gandhi called for elections and ended the state of emergency, Indian voters turned her out of office. "To Indira Gandhi's credit, she did apologize for the emergency," Rajmohan Gandhi said.

"That was a terrific period where many people enjoyed fighting for press freedom," he said. "I should also admit that because people like Myron and many other journalists from the rest of the world were present in India, that gave us courage."

Today, with a vibrant free press still the norm in India, Gandhi said a new threat faces journalists – the competition for readers amid a noisy, "glossy" media market. "Today there is no emergency and there is no censorship, but moneymaking, lifestyle news, Bollywood news, entertainment news continues to black out news from the media in India," he said.

Still, Gandhi said the culture of press freedom remains an essential part of India. And he praised as "very inspiring" the vigorous free press that has grown in neighboring Pakistan.

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