

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Statement by President Obama on World Humanitarian Day.....	1
Secretary Clinton Invites Israel, Palestinians to Restart Direct Talks	1
Off to Find America, Mosque by Mosque.....	2
Visionary Educator's Legacy Lives Among Deaf Children in Africa	3

Statement by President Obama on World Humanitarian Day

Obama condemns heinous attacks against humanitarian aid workers

THE WHITE HOUSE
Office of the Press Secretary
August 19, 2010

Statement by the President on World Humanitarian Day

Seven years ago today, terrorists heinously attacked the UN Headquarters in Baghdad, killing twenty-two innocent people who were in Iraq to support Iraqis in their quest to live with freedom, dignity, and security. That outrageous attack highlighted the increasing dangers faced by unarmed humanitarians from around the world who dedicate their lives to serving their fellow human beings, often in extremely difficult circumstances. It is our respect and gratitude for their contributions that has led the international community to designate August 19 as World Humanitarian Day.

These humanitarians live and work in the world's most dangerous and difficult places, often at great risk to their own lives. From Somalia to Sudan, Haiti to Iraq, Burma to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Pakistan to Afghanistan, these individuals, often unheralded, provide life-sustaining support to millions. Today, we honor their selfless service and the humanitarian principles that they embody.

These local and international humanitarian aid workers have distinguished themselves again this year. In the aftermath of the deadly earthquake in Haiti, humanitarian aid workers from around the world mobilized immediately for emergency rescue efforts, and remain in the country today to support ongoing relief and recovery efforts. Today humanitarian aid workers are providing food, water and other life-saving assistance to millions of Pakistanis devastated by flooding. In Sudan, aid workers risk violent attacks and kidnapping to try to feed the displaced of Darfur and help the South prepare for its approaching referendum.

Today we also mourn the losses of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of humanitarian ideals. This month, ten American, Afghan, German, and British humanitarian workers in Afghanistan were brutally murdered. They died distributing medicine, eyeglasses, and other assistance urgently needed by the people of Afghanistan. And they are the victims of a dangerous trend. Armed groups are increasingly targeting the humanitarian workers whose simple goal is to help innocent civilians in times of danger and suffering. Over the past decade, over 700 humanitarian workers have lost

their lives in service, and murders of humanitarian aid workers have more than tripled annually, to 102 deaths in 2009.

On this World Humanitarian Day, the United States condemns the killing, kidnapping and other attacks against humanitarian aid workers and we reaffirm our enduring commitment to the goals to which they have dedicated their lives. Every humanitarian aid worker must be free to serve without fear for their safety, and every person in the world must be able to pursue their aspirations in peace and security.

Secretary Clinton Invites Israel, Palestinians to Restart Direct Talks

Says final-status issues can be resolved within one year
By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington – The Obama administration has invited Israeli and Palestinian leaders to Washington to hold their first direct talks in nearly two years, and says it believes that all final-status issues that have stood in the way of ending the decades-old conflict in favor of a two-state solution can be resolved within one year.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton announced at the State Department August 20 that both Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas have been invited to Washington and that direct negotiations between the two sides would be relaunched on September 2.

"There have been difficulties in the past; there will be difficulties ahead. Without a doubt, we will hit more obstacles," including efforts by some to derail the peace negotiations, Clinton said.

"But I ask the parties to persevere, to keep moving forward even through difficult times and to continue working to achieve a just and lasting peace in the region," she said. The United States believes that the resolution of all long-standing disagreements between the two sides "can be completed within one year," she said.

Abbas and Netanyahu will join President Obama, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and Jordan's King Abdullah II on September 1 for meetings and a dinner, followed by a trilateral meeting with Clinton on September 2 to restart the direct talks.

"As we move forward, it is important that actions by all sides help to advance our effort, not hinder it," the secretary said. The direct negotiations "should take place without preconditions, and be characterized by good faith and a commitment to their success, which will bring a better future to all of the people of the region."

The United Nations, Russia, the European Union and the United States, collectively known as the Middle East Quartet, issued a statement August 20 reaffirming their view that direct, bilateral negotiations to resolve final-status issues such as Israeli settlements, borders, security, the status of Jerusalem and the right of return for Palestinian refugees should "lead to a settlement, negotiated between the parties, that ends the occupation which began in 1967 and results in the emergence of an independent, democratic and viable Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with Israel and its other neighbors."

The Quartet said it is determined to support the parties throughout the negotiating process and the implementation of a potential agreement, and believes that the talks "can be completed within one year."

It also repeated its call for both sides to "observe calm and restraint, and to refrain from provocative actions and inflammatory rhetoric."

Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Quartet's special envoy, has been invited to participate in the September 1 dinner at the White House.

Face-to-face talks between Israel and the Palestinians broke down in December 2008. In May, after a 19-month deadlock, Netanyahu and Abbas agreed to resume indirect contacts known as "proximity talks," which have been facilitated by U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell.

Mitchell told reporters August 20 that an end to the conflict is "in the national security interest of the United States," as well as in the interests of the parties and the broader Middle East region. The Obama administration is pursuing that goal "with patience, perseverance and determination," and with the full participation of the Quartet and other allies, Mitchell said.

"We will be active participants," he said, and "have indicated to both parties that, as necessary and appropriate, we will offer bridging proposals." However, he emphasized that the talks will be direct bilateral negotiations and that any final decisions "will be made by the parties themselves."

"We are patient. We are persevering. And we are determined. And we believe there is a basis for concluding a peace agreement in the region. That's what we're going to pursue," he said.

Despite continued deep feelings of mistrust between the two sides and widespread skepticism due to previous failures to reach a final agreement, Mitchell said the alternative to seeking a negotiated peace settlement is to

condemn Israelis and Palestinians to "never-ending conflict, never-ending difficulties."

"We simply don't believe that's a proper basis for any country, and certainly not ours, the United States, on which to base its policy," he said.

"Our hope is that there will be an agreement that will end the conflict for all time and will result in the establishment of a viable, democratic and independent state of Palestine living side by side in peace and security with Israel," Mitchell said.

Off to Find America, Mosque by Mosque

Two New Yorkers take to the road for Ramadan

By Jeff Baron

Staff Writer

Washington — For Ramadan, Aman Ali and Bassam Tariq are touring Muslim America. They are fasting their way across 30 states and celebrating iftars in 30 mosques. They are driving 12,000 miles (19,300 kilometers) to get closer to their faith.

And they are having a great time.

Ali, 26, an Indian American, and Tariq, 23, a Pakistani American, are buddies in New York. A year ago, they said, they were praying at a mosque with a big crowd on the first day of Ramadan and came up with the idea of spending the holy month visiting a different mosque each day — 30 mosques in 30 days. "In New York City, there's over 800,000 Muslims. If you type my address on Google, you can find 162 mosques in a five-mile radius," Ali said. "And so we're like, 'Hey, let's try it.'"

Their friends liked the idea, and demanded a blog about the experience, which Ali and Tariq did "almost as a way to shut them up," Ali said. The responses started coming: first from friends, then from strangers throughout New York, then from elsewhere in the United States, "and then we're getting e-mails from Canada, then, like, the U.K., then the Middle East, people from Luxembourg and, like, China — 'Dude, you're going to get in trouble, don't send these e-mails' — and all over the world," Ali said.

In a way, the two men toured the Muslim world in those 30 days in 2009: In praying at a wide variety of mosques, they found an equally wide variety of Muslim communities and broke their daily fasts with a wide variety of food.

Tariq said one of the goals was "getting out of our comfort zone" and stepping off the usual paths of their lives. As varied as the city is, he said, "Everyone in New York lives their own bubbled life, and you don't step out of that bubble."

This year, Tariq and Ali have left the bubble far behind. With the help of blog readers and the hospitality of friends and strangers across the country, they are driving from the East Coast of the United States to the West Coast and back, stopping in states that border Canada and Mexico — taking 30 days to visit 30 mosques in 29 states and the District of Columbia, where Washington is located.

With each new city, Tariq said, “You just already know in your mind that you don’t know what to expect.” And he said the men are making an effort to visit more than the well-established mosques frequented by the most successful Muslim Americans — what he called “doctor mosques.”

“That’s definitely an important narrative if you look at Muslims in this country, but there are so many other narratives that also need to be told,” Ali said. “We wanted to dig a little bit deeper.”

An early stop in Augusta, Maine, for example, introduced the men to the friendly, small, picturesque state capital, its very small, close-knit Muslim community and its mosque — where about a dozen people of various ethnic backgrounds worship. They rely on one another for such essentials as halal food: Community members take turns making the weekly drive to a halal butcher in Boston to pick up each family’s orders.

And a brief visit to the burial place, or mazar, of a Sri Lankan-born Sufi saint in rural Chester County, Pennsylvania, inspired Tariq to stay longer to produce a photo essay about the peaceful spot, the people who visit it and the members of the fellowship that maintains it. “I’ve never prayed with that many white people in my entire life,” he said.

Some things will be familiar: The men will visit Tariq’s family in Houston; Ali’s parents and brother in New Orleans; and the mosque in Columbus, Ohio, where Ali grew up. Tariq said he knows already that it will be hard to tear himself away from his family after less than a day so he can continue the journey.

The blog offers insights into the culture, history and — inevitably, during a month of observing Ramadan’s fasts and then celebrating each day’s iftar — the food Ali and Tariq find before them. “It’s amazing how much people can bond when there’s a plate of food in front of them. It’s the most beautiful thing,” Ali said.

When he is not driving from mosque to mosque, Ali is a journalist and a stand-up comedian. Tariq once worked in advertising but in recent months has been producing a documentary film in his native Pakistan. Both said they recognized that they might never again have the

opportunity to leave other responsibilities behind for a month to pray and travel while singing along to what Tariq called “a lot of bad ‘90s pop songs.”

“We’re not trying to claim that our project is one broad, all-encompassing view of Muslims in the U.S., because we don’t have enough space and time to do that,” Ali said. “But what these are, are personal and individual stories along the way. People can take what they want from them.”

Visionary Educator’s Legacy Lives Among Deaf Children in Africa

Andrew Foster blazed a trail of opportunity for the hearing-impaired

By Steve Holgate

Special Correspondent

Portland, Oregon — Andrew Foster, deprived of his hearing by a childhood illness, championed education for the deaf and established a legacy that still flourishes in Africa.

The son of an African-American coal miner, Foster was born in Alabama in 1925. Spinal meningitis deprived him of his hearing at age 10, in a time when educational opportunities in Alabama were limited for black children and more so for deaf children. Unable to go beyond sixth grade in local schools, Foster moved to Detroit to live with an aunt. There he earned a secondary-school diploma and gained a deep Christian faith that would spur his life’s work. In the words of his son Tim, Foster “became infused with a passion for education.”

Foster was accepted at Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University), the premier educational institution for the deaf in the United States, and in 1954 became its first African-American graduate. During the next few years, while continuing his studies, he became increasingly certain his vocation was bringing educational opportunities to deaf Africans.

Discouraged by others at every turn, Foster gave up trying to work with existing missionary programs and decided to establish his own. He formed the Christian Mission for the Deaf and raised funds to support his vision, primarily through his home church in Detroit. In 1957, at the age of 31, lacking any contacts, he took a leap of courage and faith to fly to Africa, intent on establishing a school for the deaf.

The conditions he found in Africa might have driven anyone else to take the first flight home. Deafness was considered a curse, something to be hidden from others. According to Foster’s son, some deaf children in Africa were kept at home and raised as servants, while others were cast out by their families and exposed to the

elements to die. Government officials insisted to Foster that there were no deaf children in their countries.

Foster persevered and, with funds he had raised in the United States, established his first school for the deaf in Ghana. As children flocked to it, officials recognized the unmet need and set up a national education system for the deaf.

Encouraged by his success in Ghana, Foster traveled throughout Africa, setting up churches and schools for the deaf. During the next 30 years, shuttling between the United States for fundraising and Africa for building, he founded schools at the rate of one a year.

LAYING A SOLID FOUNDATION FOR LIFE

In Foster's schools, children learned sign language, gained a solid education and acquired job skills, but Foster's vision was always broader. His son Tim, told America.gov, "The end goal has always been spiritual in focus," and Foster sought to give students the opportunity for spiritual as well as educational development.

But Foster was no empire builder. He had no intention of creating a personal network of institutions for the deaf, but instead sought to use his successes to spur local officials into establishing more schools. He also wanted schools he founded to become independent, spinning off from his Christian Mission for Deaf and becoming self-sufficient.

This strategy led to almost unimaginable success: There are now hundreds of schools for the deaf in Africa. Foster's mission now administers only three schools, and two of those are partially self-supporting.

Foster lost his life in December 1987 when, wishing to go to Kenya to further his work, he took the last available seat on a charter flight to Nairobi. The plane crashed shortly after take-off, killing all aboard.

Decades after his death, Foster's legacy continues to grow. Some of his students earned scholarships to travel to the United States and attend his alma mater, Gallaudet University. Schools for the deaf continue to blossom throughout Africa, often administered by his former students, and thousands of deaf children each year gain an education that would not have been possible without Foster's efforts. The Christian Mission for the Deaf continues to operate from its headquarters in Ibadan, Nigeria, and from its U.S. home in Texas, where Foster's wife, Marta, continued his work until 2009, when she was succeeded by his children.

At Gallaudet University, where Foster pioneered the path

for African-American students and gained an honorary doctorate in 1970, an auditorium has been named in his honor and a scholarship established in his name.

In the words of a former student who spoke at Foster's memorial service: "It was his opinion that a deaf person living in Africa who cannot read or write was like a piece of gold lost in a remote mine. That piece of gold had to be taken out and polished" in order to reflect its true value.

The work started by Foster to mine that gold continues, enriching the lives of both the deaf and the hearing throughout Africa and in the United States.

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