

# American

## NEWS & VIEWS

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## U.S. Condemns “Outrageous” Attack by al-Shabaab on Somali Hotel

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — Obama administration officials condemned an attack on a Mogadishu hotel that reportedly left 30 dead, including six parliament members in Somalia’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG), and said the United States will continue to partner with countries in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere against terrorism and violent extremists.

Speaking August 24 in Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts, where President Obama is on holiday, John Brennan, the president’s assistant for counterterrorism and homeland security, said U.S. officials “are saddened today by the loss of life” in the attack, which was claimed by Somalia’s al-Shabaab militant group.

According to press reports, al-Shabaab gunmen, dressed as government security forces, killed two security guards at the Muna Hotel and proceeded to indiscriminately shoot residents, including lawmakers and government officials. The hotel is located in an area of the Somali capital that is under TFG control, and an al-Shabaab spokesman said August 24 that the attack targeted the Somali parliamentarians.

“This is a particularly outrageous act during the Islamic month of Ramadan. And al-Shabaab’s vision for Africa stands in sharp contrast to the vision of the overwhelming majority of Africans,” Brennan said.

“The United States will continue to partner with those who oppose terrorism, extremism and violence in all forms, and will continue to work very closely with those in Africa, particularly in the Horn of Africa in Somalia, who are interested in ensuring that Africa can build and realize its full potential and prosperity for all Africans,” he said.

Brennan said the Obama administration is working with countries and governments in Africa to share information and to “bolster their capability to repel and repulse any types of al-Shabaab efforts to carry out attacks in their countries.”

He said there is “some crossover” between al-Shabaab and al-Qaida, with some individuals operating within both organizations who are “dedicated to carrying out attacks not just inside of Somalia ... but also outside of the area.”

Al-Shabaab has claimed responsibility for the July 11 suicide attacks in the Ugandan capital, Kampala, which

killed more than 70 people who had gathered to watch the final FIFA World Cup match.

State Department Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs P.J. Crowley strongly condemned the attack against those staying at the hotel and offered condolences to the family and friends of the victims.

Speaking to reporters August 24, he said the incident “highlights al-Shabaab’s complete disregard for human life, Somali culture and Islamic values.”

“The terrorists appear to have been targeting Somali parliamentarians and other members of the Transitional Federal Government, further evidence that they are bent on depriving Somalia of security, peace and stability,” he said, and he reaffirmed the strong U.S. commitment to support the TFG and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

He also said the United States is “very grateful” to Uganda for its recent announcement that it is sending additional resources to support the AMISOM mission.

## Environmental Factors Inform Plans to Resettle Displaced Haitians

By Stephen Kaufman  
Staff Writer

Washington — For many of the 1.5 million Haitians living in relief camps since the January 12 earthquake, shelter that is sturdier, more weatherproof and more secure cannot come soon enough. But the tremendous demand is balanced by the need to prepare temporary resettlement sites that can offer improved living conditions for up to three years with minimal impact on the environment.

Mollie Lemon, an employee at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in Washington, recently returned from six weeks supporting personnel from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the country by lending her background in environmental science to help identify the best sites to resettle the many Haitians who are still living in tents.

USAID had provided the International Organization for Migration in Haiti with \$15 million in emergency funding to improve ad hoc and temporary shelters for those affected by the disaster, including the development of new sites and resettlement.

Lemon’s group operated from the perspective that environmentally sustainable settlements are critical to the well-being of the disaster survivors as well as the environment. A poorly planned site could leave people

vulnerable to flooding, landslides and diseases.

“You’re trying to respond quickly to the situation posed by this humanitarian crisis while at the same time realizing that people are probably going to be living in these for a fairly long time, and so it’s about striking that balance between getting people moved into a safe place as soon as possible while at the same time following the standards and the environmental best practices,” she told America.gov.

Those standards have been set by international organizations such as the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP), which is drawing attention to the need to minimize the long-term environmental damage from short-term resettlement camps. Such damage can be caused by pollution, sewage, debris, flooding, deforestation and other factors.

According to the UNEP’s website, even before the earthquake, “Haiti was the poorest, least stable and most environmentally degraded country in the Caribbean. This environmental degradation had severe and wide-reaching social and economic impacts, as the largely destroyed rural environment could not fully feed its population or provide adequate livelihoods.”

The population “continues to suffer from ongoing poverty, food insecurity, health problems, and disaster vulnerability, which are strongly interlinked with severe environmental issues such as extensive deforestation, soil erosion, inadequate waste management, water scarcity and coastal zone degradation, many of which have been further exacerbated by the recent earthquake,” UNEP says.

Lemon helped assess potential camp sites that will house up to 30,000 people by identifying areas that would be the most environmentally sound for human settlement. Attention was given to the slope and drainage of the land, the amount of rocks or boulders that could affect construction, whether it was located in a flood plain, and proximity to a clean water source, among other factors.

“In the case of Haiti, where the environmental problems are compounded, there is a chance to incorporate environmental practices where they perhaps weren’t being incorporated beforehand,” Lemon said.

Lemon and other team members surveyed current shelter residents to determine what could be improved in the new locations. For example, some residents complained that their drinking water, while plentiful, was of poor quality, and that tents and crowded conditions have left them vulnerable to security concerns and fires. In addition, “Some people living in Corail Cesselesse, a resettlement camp on the outskirts of Port au Prince, felt

like they were too far removed from the city and thus they weren’t able to get transportation to their jobs or send their kids to school,” Lemon said.

The construction of the transitional shelters (or t-shelters) themselves ideally would minimize the use of poured concrete, use bolts rather than nails and use building materials such as wood and plywood that will degrade naturally. Homes would have locks for security, and some could include an area for a small garden and offer electricity to provide light, Lemon said. The resettlement sites should incorporate proper waste management systems to avoid leaving the land in a degraded state once the resettlement area is decommissioned.

The demand for t-shelters is high, and many people currently living in tents had been told soon after the earthquake that it would be a matter of only months before more permanent structures would be completed. Along with the need to assess potential long-term sites, Lemon said, the need to remove debris has contributed to the delay, as has continued poor weather conditions during the current hurricane season.

Nigel Fisher, a deputy special representative of U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, said July 12 that 5,000 t-shelters had been built, with 100,000 more expected to be completed by August 2011. Along with the construction of the new facilities, the United Nations is assessing homes for reconstruction or repair, Fisher said. So far, 125,000 had been found to be structurally safe; he estimated that 100,000 people had been able to return home. Fisher also said the U.N. is discussing with Haitian officials the issue of customs charges that have led to delays in getting building materials into the country.

Lemon said it is difficult to come to terms with the level of need among the displaced Haitians or know when their lives will be able to return to normal.

“It just seems like it’s such an overwhelming job and that it’s going to take so long,” she said. But some of the NGOs were on the ground even before the earthquake and they are “definitely committed for the long term,” she said.

Although her own stay in the country was limited to six weeks, Lemon said she hopes that her research can be used not only to improve living conditions in Haiti, but also to provide guidance to improve future resettlement operations elsewhere.

Along with the need for proper planning, “I think the idea is to sort of help speed up the process because time is definitely of the essence,” she said.

## Palestinian Talent and American Experience Launch Ghaneeha

*Ghaneeha singing contest draws Palestinians from around the West Bank*

By M. Scott Bortot  
Staff Writer

Washington — A partnership that brought together Palestinian talent and American experience has literally given West Bank youth something to sing about.

The Ghaneeha competition, held in July, was the first-ever televised Palestinian talent-search show. Initiated by the Jerusalem-based Sabreen Association for Artistic Development and supported by the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem, Ghaneeha was broadcast locally and internationally by the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation.

“We thought that it would be a good idea to get the kids more excited about music if they could get on TV and win prizes,” said Norah Shaqur, public relations director at Sabreen. “It is all part of motivating the kids.”

Ghaneeha’s 10 finalists performed in Ramallah on July 3 before a panel of judges and 800 spectators. Noor Freitakh, a 16-year-old from Nablus, won the competition with a stirring rendition of a song by Syrian-Egyptian singer Asmahan, “My Sweetheart Come Back to Me.”

“What I loved the most about this competition is that I was actually able to do the thing I love to do most in life, which is singing,” Freitakh said. “My voice is better, I am a better person and my self-confidence is much higher now.”

The competition featured 70 children ages 12–18 from all over the West Bank. Over a four-month period, the youth participated in workshops to improve their skills in the hopes of reaching the final competition.

Cynthia Harvey, cultural affairs officer at the U.S. Consulate in Jerusalem, said Ghaneeha is one of the largest cultural programs ever undertaken through the consulate.

“We came up with this project as a way for young Palestinians to engage in an activity that would inspire creativity, promote self-esteem, and encourage nonviolent means of self-expression,” Harvey said. “In the end, all of the participants in Ghaneeha were winners. They inspired other Palestinians to dream big and strive to reach their full potential.”

The project was coordinated with the Palestinian Authority’s Ministry of Education, the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

(UNRWA) and the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem.

Most of Ghaneeha’s funding was provided by the consulate, which also sponsored American trainers from the Washington-based modern dance ensemble CityDance to work with the singers.

Said Murad, director-general of Sabreen, said international partnerships such as the one with CityDance play an integral role in many of the organization’s programs.

“In Ghaneeha, we have established a strong connection with CityDance. Their vocal and movement specialists, along with Sabreen trainers, succeeded in training the students and helping us achieve the goals set for the program,” Murad said.

Performers with CityDance coached the finalists the week before the Ramallah show. Paul Emerson, director and cofounder of CityDance, was impressed by the young Palestinians.

“These kids didn’t have a lot of formal training, but you want to talk about some people who can sing — they were incredible!” Emerson said. “Just to watch a group of young people who just weren’t sure what they could do and how they could do it, and literally using the cliché ‘to find their own voices,’ was really something.”

CityDance’s Amikaeyla Gaston, who is also executive director of the U.S.-based International Cultural Arts and Healing Sciences Institute, helped the youth improve and preserve their voices. As a vocalist and a voice teacher, this is her specialty.

“A lot of children were singing from their throat and getting really raw and raspy voices because they were pushing so hard without amplification and without proper breath control,” Gaston said. “[I was] trying to really guide them on techniques to use to save their voices so in the long run they can always sing beautifully.”

Voice control is only part of the training process. Another aspect is how a singer holds the body, which can be just as crucial as training the vocal cords. Christopher K. Morgan, rehearsal director and choreographer-in-residence at CityDance, helped the young singers master their poise.

Morgan works the “physical modalities” of the body to maximize performance.

“It was really about just getting them to have ownership over their performance and to fully embrace self-confidence as they sing their song,” Morgan said. “It wasn’t a lot of dance movement — it was mostly just

working on their stage presence.”

How the young people took to new ideas presented by foreigners impressed the American trainers.

“The kids were so open and ready for information and assimilated ideas really quickly,” Morgan said. “I think that is the benefit of youth.”

Freitakh benefitted from working with Morgan and Gaston.

“They helped us a lot in improving our breathing skills and our presence on stage. We can now own the stage when we sing,” she said. “They made us see and discover new, beautiful things and talents that we never knew we had in us.”

“The improvement in the posture and position of the kids onstage was obvious and remarkable,” Shaqur said of the effect of the American trainers on the young people. “Not only did they gain confidence but also they learned to loosen up and relax onstage and offstage.”

Ghaneeha is not Sabreen’s first program for Palestinians. In fact, this program is the latest chapter in a two-decade history of helping young Palestinians to find expression through music.

The Americans praised Sabreen’s efforts in the Palestinian Territories. And Emerson is looking forward to continuing the relationship between CityDance and Sabreen.

“They are a really good choice for a partner over there. ... We are going to be doing stuff with them in the future,” Emerson said. “I am a huge fan of theirs and a huge fan of the project.”

Apparently, the Americans may get another chance to work with Palestinian youth. Since the competition, aspiring contestants are reaching out to Sabreen via phone, e-mail and the organization’s Facebook page.

“The very positive feedback that we have gotten from people has inspired us to do Ghaneeha again next year,” Shaqur said.

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