

American

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U.S. Central Bank Chief Says Fed Could Act to Shore Up Economy

By Andrzej Zwaniecki
Staff Writer

Washington — Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke said the U.S. central bank will not hesitate to use policies at its disposal to support the economic recovery and prevent the U.S. economy from spiraling into a period of deflation.

Concerns have been raised among economic experts, even within the U.S. central bank, that the U.S. economy could be heading for trouble, as the potential for a period of deflation (a decline in general price levels) combined with sluggish growth increases. The combination has affected Japan's economy for two decades.

In an anxiously awaited August 27 speech at a U.S. central bankers' gathering in Wyoming, Bernanke said the Federal Reserve is prepared to resume its large purchases of long-term securities to help sustain economic growth if the recovery falters or inflation declines further. He said such a policy would be an option preferred to other possible approaches. Having driven down short-term interest rates close to zero, the U.S. central bank has a limited range of "unconventional" options left to support the economy.

The Federal Reserve spent \$1.7 trillion buying government bonds and other securities in a program that ended in March. Bernanke credited this program with contributing to economic stabilization and recovery, as it helped to keep home loans and other long-term borrowing rates low.

Bernanke said the policymaking committee of the Federal Reserve has not agreed on specific criteria or a trigger for any "unconventional" action.

He acknowledged that the pace of growth in the overall economy is "somewhat less vigorous than we expected," because of restrained consumer spending and weakness in construction.

On the day he spoke, the Commerce Department announced the economy grew at a much slower pace in the second quarter than previously estimated. The department revised down to 1.6 percent from 2.4 percent its earlier estimate of the annualized rate of growth of the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP).

Bernanke said growth would continue in the second half of the year, "albeit at a relatively modest pace." For 2011 and subsequent years, he said, "it is reasonable to expect some pickup in growth," with unemployment "likely to

decline only slowly." He noted that in recent quarters actual household saving has been higher than earlier estimates, a development that will allow consumers flexibility to spend more as the economy, and confidence in it, improve.

Bernanke played down a sharp increase in the U.S. trade deficit in the second quarter. He said it "seems to have reflected a number of temporary and special forces." The June trade gap of close to \$50 billion as reported by the Commerce Department was the largest in 19 months.

U.S. Aid Director Reports "Astronomical" Damage in Pakistan

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — Urging much more relief assistance for Pakistani flood victims, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Dr. Rajiv Shah said that during his recent visit to the country he could see that "the scale and the scope of this natural disaster is astronomical."

Shah spoke in Washington August 27 after returning from an August 24-26 visit to Pakistan, where he consulted with government officials and relief organizations on expanding and improving flood relief efforts. Shah said that while in Pakistan, he was able to see some of the flooding's tragic aftermath firsthand.

More than 20 million Pakistanis have been affected by the flooding, and Shah said perhaps more than 9 million of those need immediate humanitarian support such as food, clean drinking water, medicine and shelter.

"This is a core global humanitarian imperative and we need more international support," Shah said.

"There is no question that right now more can be done and that resources spent on immediate relief will save lives, feed people who need food and help keep children from experiencing long-term morbidity from diarrhea and a range of other illnesses."

The country also faces urgent assistance needs because 23 percent of Pakistan's most productive cropland has been submerged by the flooding in the Indus River Valley, and it could remain waterlogged for some time, Shah said. Many seed stocks for the coming planting season have been lost, and the damage to the country's overall economy could be severe, given that Pakistan's agricultural sector had provided employment for more than 60 percent of its population.

Shah had announced in Pakistan August 25 that the Obama administration is providing \$50 million from

funding allocated under the 2009 Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act to support early flood recovery programs, such as rehabilitation of community infrastructure and livelihood recovery activities. That funding brings the total amount of U.S. immediate humanitarian assistance in response to the flooding to more than \$200 million, in addition to in-kind and technical assistance such as the use of U.S. aircraft to rescue flood victims and deliver relief supplies.

According to the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, since the flooding began at the end of July, U.S. civilian and military aircraft have evacuated at least 8,010 people and delivered more than 1.8 million pounds (816,466 kilos) of relief supplies in the most remote areas of Pakistan where relief convoys cannot travel overland.

Nine U.S. mobile water-treatment units are now in Pakistan, and the embassy said U.S. water-production units have so far provided 5.4 million liters of safe drinking water.

The World Food Programme has reached more than 1.9 million flood-affected people with approximately 22,300 metric tons of food aid, according to the embassy. Approximately 50 percent of that assistance was provided by the United States.

Shah said that while he was able to see that more assistance is arriving in Pakistan, "when you look at the scope of what needs to be done here ... we need more resources and support from inside Pakistan and outside Pakistan in order to be successful."

U.S.-based callers can help with relief efforts by texting "FLOOD" to the number 27722, which will contribute a \$10 donation to the State Department's Pakistan Relief Fund. In addition, by texting "SWAT" to the number 50555, U.S.-based callers can make a \$10 contribution that will help the United Nations provide the Pakistani people with tents, clothing, food, drinking water and medicine. Donors everywhere can find more information and lists of relief organizations operating in Pakistan through the State Department website.

The State Department has invited the Pakistani people to use the Humari Awaz ("Our Voice") social network to share information and updates by texting "FLOODS" to 7111. Through the Pakistan-based mobile phone network, they can update each other about the latest flood news and valuable grant and business opportunities, and make new announcements of support. The network was launched by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton during her visit to Pakistan in October 2009, and subscribers since have sent more than 350 million messages. To learn how to use Humari Awaz, Pakistani mobile users should text "HELP" or "MADAD" to 7111.

Shah said Pakistan's long-term needs will be assessed after the extent of the damage can be determined, but he predicted that the country will need significant resources and partners in the international community in recovery and reconstruction efforts.

He said there will be an obvious reprogramming of more of the \$7.5 billion in U.S. civilian assistance that was authorized by the Kerry-Lugar-Berman Act.

"Our mission team in the embassy is looking pretty broadly at how to best move forward with a real focus on doing those things that generate the highest rates of return," Shah said. But, he added, "this flood only intensifies our immediate response and our commitment to that long-term process."

Muslim Chaplains Serve U.S. College Campuses

By Karen Calabria
Special Correspondent

New York — When Umar Qadri arrived as a freshman at Yale University three years ago this September, he felt the prospects for Muslim religious life on campus were grim.

At most, two dozen students showed up to weekly Friday prayers. Religious celebrations and interfaith events were difficult to arrange without help from the university's administration. Infighting dogged the Muslim Students Association (MSA), which steadily declined in membership, recalls Qadri.

He can point to the exact moment when things began to look up: July 1, 2008, the day the university appointed Omer Bajwa as its first Muslim chaplain. Bajwa is one of a growing number of Muslim chaplains on American campuses serving an estimated 75,000 Muslim college students, according to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.

"He gave legitimacy to the Muslim community here," said Qadri, a 21-year-old near Eastern languages and civilization major. "Membership in the MSA has increased, as well as attendance at worship and events. I've noticed my attendance increase since he's been here."

Bajwa sees the increasing numbers of Muslim chaplains on college campuses as the result of a shift in the makeup of the American Muslim community.

A recent study found that more than one-third of American Muslims are between the ages of 18 and 29. And they are more likely to go to college than many other groups. At least 40 percent of American Muslims have a college degree; they comprise the second most educated religious group in the United States after American Jews, according to the 2009 Gallup Center for Muslim Studies

report.

Since the 1999 appointment of Imam Yahya Hendi at Georgetown University in Washington as the first Muslim chaplain on an American college campus, more institutions have been looking to fill the void.

"Hiring Muslim chaplains is becoming more of a normal practice," Hendi said. "In wanting to meet the demands of their students, universities are starting to make sure that all communities have access to prayer on campus. If you want your students to be served well, you have to serve them well spiritually too."

Although no official statistics document the exact number of staff at universities, experts suggest at least two dozen institutions employ full-time Muslim chaplains and point to increasingly frequent job listings.

"It's becoming something the students expect," says Marcia Hermansen, director of the Islamic World Studies Program at Loyola University Chicago. "University-age students are at a crucial stage in establishing their identities, and religion can be very healthy. It's good to have these resources available on campus – they're important for identity and socialization."

For many Muslim students, the campus chapter of the Muslim Students Association is often the only outlet for their religious needs. In many cases, the MSA is responsible for arranging worship service, coordinating religious celebrations and planning interfaith events.

Some students, like Zacharea Katerji, a junior pre-medicine student and the incoming president of the MSA at Loyola University Chicago, relish the responsibility. Despite the availability of several off-campus mosques nearby, Katerji, 20, said he and his fellow students don't mind the work that goes into booking space and speakers for religious celebrations or serving as the public face of Islam on campus.

"Having an on-campus option is preferable to many students. It's our mosque, our students, our friends. People seek it out not only for convenience but for community as well," he said.

But with the challenges facing American Muslims, some wonder whether it's fair to ask young students to take on a task for which chaplains spend years training: acting as ambassadors for their faith.

"Muslim students are being called on to deal with all kinds of issues that they may be enthusiastic about but are not qualified to address. Other communities, like Christian and Jewish students, often have other people to bridge the gap for them," said Timur Yuskaev, director of

the Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Yale's Bajwa agrees. "In a post-9/11 world, Muslim students have special needs. You can't expect 18-to-22-year-olds to engage with other faiths, explain themselves or be in charge of religious life on campus as well as seeing to their studies. Universities are recognizing the need to have people on campuses that are committed to doing this, that have an actual skill set."

For now, those skills can be acquired only at Hartford Seminary. The Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford enrolls only 20 students at a time, with specialized training for hospital, prison, military and university chaplaincy.

"We're training these students to be able to deal with diverse Muslim student populations, which is extremely important in the States, where Muslims come from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds and religious understandings," Yuskaev said. The ability to juggle interfaith relationships, both on campus and off, is an integral part of the chaplaincy program.

Despite the common acceptance of faith communities on campus, there are some who dismiss out of hand the presence of religion at colleges and universities.

To them Yuskaev responds: "If you negate spirituality and the religious aspect of people's lives, you're not fulfilling your role as an institution of higher learning, as a shaper of students' lives."

North Korea Releases Imprisoned American

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington – Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, following two days of talks in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, secured a pardon for an American held prisoner for seven months by the North Korean regime.

Carter and the 31-year-old American, Aijalon Mahli Gomes, boarded a flight August 27 for Boston, which is Gomes' home. Carter reportedly asked North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to "leniently forgive" Gomes for straying into the country illegally in January and grant him a special pardon, according to the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

In Washington, the State Department released a statement from spokesman P.J. Crowley that said, "We welcome the release of Aijalon Mahli Gomes and are relieved that he will soon be safely reunited with his family. We appreciate former President Carter's humanitarian effort and welcome North Korea's decision to grant Mr. Gomes

special amnesty and allow him to return to the United States.”

Crowley also thanked the Swedish government for its “tireless consular services and efforts” on the United States’ behalf in its role as the protecting power for the United States in North Korea.

Carter’s trip was a private, humanitarian and unofficial mission solely for the purpose of bringing Gomes home. The former president traveled at the invitation of the North Korean government, the State Department said. The United States and North Korea do not have diplomatic relations.

“Based on our assessment that Mr. Gomes’ health was at serious risk if he did not receive immediate care in the United States, the U.S. government concurred with former President Carter’s decision to accept the North Korean proposal,” Crowley said.

Carter was met at the Pyongyang airport by Kim Kye-gwan, a senior North Korean diplomat who is the main envoy to the Six-Party Talks on ending North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, according to the official KCNA. The news agency reported that Carter met with North Korean officials and discussed an array of issues during the brief visit.

The former president visited North Korea in 1994 and met with President Kim Il-sung, the late father of the current leader, to discuss nuclear talks and efforts to encourage the North to forgo its nuclear weapons program.

Gomes was the fourth American in a year who has been arrested for entering North Korea without permission. Journalists Laura Ling and Euna Lee were arrested last March and released after former President Bill Clinton made a similar trip to Pyongyang to appeal for their freedom. Robert Park entered North Korea from China in December 2009 and was expelled after being held for 40 days.

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