

American

NEWS & VIEWS

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Statement on Burma's Independence Day

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
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STATEMENT BY MARK C. TONER, ACTING
SPOKESMAN

Burma's Independence Day

Tuesday, January 4, 2011 marks the 63rd anniversary of Burma's independence. We offer our congratulations to the people of Burma on this occasion.

We are unwavering in our support for an independent, peaceful, prosperous, and democratic Burma. The United States remains prepared to improve bilateral relations, but looks to the Burmese government to meet the aspirations of its diverse peoples by freeing all political prisoners and engaging in an inclusive and meaningful dialogue with all its citizens in pursuit of genuine national reconciliation.

We join the international community in anticipating the day when Burma's citizens will succeed in their peaceful efforts to exercise freely their universal human rights.

Volunteering Around the World from the Comfort of Home

By Lindsey E Oechsle
Staff Writer

Washington — If you have a computer, an Internet connection and skills, you can volunteer in any one of 130 countries around the world without leaving home.

To register for an online volunteering opportunity run by the U.N. Volunteers (UNV) program, you simply provide background information about yourself before gaining login information for an account that allows you to search the world for volunteer opportunities. Opportunities through the UNV Online Volunteering service are available for you to work from your computer, where you are.

A search for a volunteer opportunity in English involving writing and editing and devoting one to five hours per week offers 51 volunteer opportunities, from Germany to Ghana. French and Spanish volunteer opportunities are also available.

Online volunteers completed 14,313 assignments in 2009, doubling the previous year's record.

Every year, more than 9,000 online volunteers help nonprofits through the UNV Online Volunteering service, which is entering its 10th year. They come from 154 countries and work for 20 different U.N. organizations.

Nongovernmental organizations, governments and U.N. agencies recognize the benefit of this virtual Peace Corps-type of work force and regularly utilize it. Some 1,347 nonprofits are registered with the UNV service.

Online volunteers provide more than valuable expertise. As the reach of the Internet continues to expand, they come from an increasingly varied number of locations, and their diverse cultural backgrounds mean projects gain from fresh perspectives.

Some online volunteers have helped develop the very nonprofits that organize projects — training staff, teaching new skills or providing advice. And many online volunteers, after completing their online commitments, share information about projects with their friends and colleagues, thereby mobilizing additional support.

In an International Volunteer Day statement this month, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon welcomed the strong growth of online volunteering, which he said, "connects people around the globe and provides them with opportunities to contribute to development and the work of the United Nations. Online volunteering has great potential, and I encourage all partners to explore what more can be done to harness the power of the internet this way."

IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH IN VOLUNTEERISM

The leaders of U.N. entities stress that volunteerism offers youth the opportunity to improve their own communities as well as those across the world from them, as the young generations can be a bridge between cultures and can serve as key agents in promoting peace and dialogue.

"Civic engagement is central to building cohesive communities, and to promoting young people's integration into society. Greater efforts should thus be made to guarantee that young women and men have the opportunity to participate in these types of activities," U.N. leaders said in a statement on the launch of the International Year of Youth.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF VOLUNTEERS

According to Johns Hopkins University, volunteers contribute \$400 billion to the global economy every year. But their contribution is more than merely financial, said UNV Executive Coordinator Flavia Pansieri. "Volunteerism contributes to promoting the inclusion of those who don't participate. It contributes to social

cohesion in situations where the link of trust between citizens and state has been broken by conflict.”

Countless testimonials provided by UNV from online volunteers report joyful life-changing experiences, satisfaction in fulfilling civic duties, and a sense of empowerment.

New Crops Bring More Nutrients to Hungry

By Kathryn McConnell
Staff Writer

Washington – Crop breeders are developing new varieties of seven staple food crops, each with high levels of essential micronutrients and each with potential for rewarding farmers who grow them with higher yields.

Their new approach is called biofortification. The goal is to bring healthier diets to people who rely on food staples for most of the calories they consume. (Most plant breeding so far has focused on helping farmers produce higher yields by building disease and pest resistance into seeds.)

“For billions of undernourished people who live in remote areas and are unable to afford nutritious foods, biofortification offers great promise,” said Howarth Bouis, director of HarvestPlus, an international organization of agricultural scientists and nutritionists.

Adding micronutrients into staple foods “is exactly what we need to ... improve global health,” said Ambassador William Garvelink, a leader of the Feed the Future initiative, the Obama administration’s effort to tackle hunger around the world. Garvelink spoke in Washington at the first international conference on biofortification.

Bouis said malnutrition is a “hidden hunger” for people without the means to purchase vitamin-and mineral-rich supplemental foods like fruits and green leafy vegetables.

More than 50 percent of women in developing countries are anemic because they do not eat sufficient amounts of iron, putting them at risk during pregnancy. Iron deficiency makes it difficult for children to concentrate in school and reduces the capacity of adults to do physical work. Iron deficiency also stunts growth and makes children vulnerable to diarrhea and pneumonia. Lack of vitamin A puts children at risk for diarrhea, measles and, sometimes, blindness.

Orange sweet potato that is rich in vitamin A is the first biofortified staple to reach large numbers of farmers and consumers. HarvestPlus began to disseminate orange sweet potato in Mozambique and Uganda in 2007.

The group plans to bring varieties of iron-rich pearl millet to India in 2011. In 2012, HarvestPlus will bring iron-rich beans to Rwanda, vitamin A-enriched maize to Zambia, and vitamin A-enriched cassava to Nigeria. The group plans to bring zinc-enriched rice to India and Bangladesh and zinc-fortified wheat to India and Pakistan in 2013.

After a biofortified crop is developed and tested to show that it can improve consumers’ health, the challenge for researchers has been to convince local farmers to grow it and consumers to eat it.

To convince consumers in Mozambique and Uganda to eat the orange type of sweet potato, HarvestPlus worked with local nongovernmental groups to go to households and explain the health benefits of the colored root vegetable. (The traditional African preference has been for the white-fleshed potato, which is deficient in vitamin A and has a different consistency than the new, more-nutritious variety.) The HarvestPlus campaign also put ads on radio and sponsored performances in village theaters about the health benefits of orange potatoes.

Bouis said biofortification is cheaper than treating nutrient deficiencies with food supplements or fortifying foods during processing. “Once biofortified foods are in the food system, they’re available year after year” at little additional cost, he said, while supplements are expensive, as is the cost of getting them to everyone who needs them. Fortified foods, like iodized salt and enriched flour, also are costly to move.

HarvestPlus was founded in 2003 with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Canadian government, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the U.K. Department for International Development and the World Bank. Its research collaborators in Africa include the Africa Rice Center, the Agricultural Research Institute in Rwanda and the National Root Crops Research Institute of Nigeria. International collaborators include the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, the International Center for Tropical Agriculture and the International Rice Research Institute. More information is available on the HarvestPlus website.

A Smarter Electric Grid for Bangalore, India

By Karin Rives
Staff Writer

Washington – A power company in Bangalore, India, will be exploring smart-grid technologies with the help of a \$453,350 pilot study funded by the United States. The project could be a win-win for the two nations as they seek to build expertise and market share in the emerging clean energy sector.

The 12-month smart-grid study is also an opportunity for the countries to build on the Partnership to Advance Clean Energy that President Obama and India Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed in 2009.

The grant from the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA) will pay a U.S. contractor to work with the Bangalore Electricity Supply Company Ltd. to explore how best to integrate smart meters and automated meter reading into an electric distribution system in the south India state of Karnataka.

USTDA links U.S. businesses to export opportunities while creating sustainable infrastructure and economic growth in partner countries – in this case by offering U.S. expertise to India as that nation builds and enhances its electric grid. The agency is now taking bids for the study.

Known as BESCOM, the Bangalore power supplier is exploring ways to deliver electricity in a more reliable and efficient way to customers in its rapidly growing service area. The company won the India Power Award in 2009 for its energy efficiency and conservation efforts.

It has also been working for several years to upgrade its system, in part with assistance from the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to USTDA's request for proposals for the contract.

The smart-grid pilot study is welcome in India, where the government is earmarking a large portion of its planned \$2.3-trillion energy investment over the next few decades for renewable and clean power sources and technologies.

The Bangalore project will help India meet "its energy-efficiency goals, an issue of critical importance to Indian energy security," said Blair Hall, counselor for economic, environment, and science and technology affairs at the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi. "Through the grant ... India will improve its ability to streamline electricity demand."

THE CLEAN ENERGY RACE

Large economies such as those of China and the United States are rushing to develop new technology that will help the world meet growing energy demands in an environmentally friendly way, and to gain a competitive advantage in the clean-energy technology marketplace.

In this new environment, it makes sense for the United States and India to work together, said Nishant Shah, a fellow at the policy research group Americans for Energy Leadership.

"While India has not been a major investor in clean energy innovation to date, its recent undertakings signal a shift in the right direction, he wrote in a December 2010

blog entry. "Such a pursuit on the part of India could facilitate widespread adoption of clean energy technology and be a major win for U.S. economic interests."

In November 2010, the United States and India agreed to establish a Joint Clean Energy Research and Development Center that seeks to mobilize up to \$100 million in public-sector and private-sector funding over five years. Also under the Partnership to Advance Clean Energy, the United States pledged in November to use two government-financing vehicles – the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) and the Export-Import Bank – to steer private sector investments in clean-energy infrastructure to India.

OPIC is providing \$100 million in financing for solar, wind, hydropower, advanced biofuels and natural gas projects in South Asia, the bulk of which will be invested in India. More than \$280 million in U.S. financing could eventually be channeled to the country.

The BESCOM pilot study likely will be housed in an office park outside Bangalore called Electronics City, where many of the city's information technology businesses are based, USTDA said. The state capital, Bangalore, is a thriving business community and home to 5.9 million residents.

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