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Vice President Biden, Pakistani Prime Minister Gilani Hold Talks on Partnership

By MacKenzie C. Babb
Staff Writer

Washington — Vice President Biden says he held “extremely useful” discussions in Islamabad with Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani on “combating terror, issues of regional stability and promoting reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan.”

The two held a joint news conference in Islamabad after meeting January 12. Biden expressed “deepest condolences” over the assassination of Punjab Provincial Governor Salman Taseer on January 4, saying “there is no justification, none, for such senseless acts.”

“As we’ve seen throughout history, societies that tolerate such actions end up being consumed by those actions,” he said.

Biden and Gilani spoke of the “enduring partnership” between the United States and Pakistan, one that Biden said is “based on our common interests and our mutual respect for one another.” He added the U.S. remains committed to partnering with Pakistan to counter violent extremists “who violate Pakistan’s sovereignty and corrupt its good name.” He emphasized the shared U.S.-Pakistan belief that “violent extremists are a threat not just to the United States, but to Pakistan as well, and indeed to the entire civilized world,” and said the two countries stood united to combat “extreme ideologies.”

Biden reiterated America’s respect for religious diversity and freedom of religion, and he spoke about the deep tradition of Islam in the United States, challenging those who question the U.S. commitment to religious freedom to “name any other country in the world, any country in the world, where those of all faiths enjoy greater freedom of worship than they do in the United States of America.”

He added, “We are not the enemies of Islam, and we embrace those who practice that great religion in our country.”

Gilani and Biden commended the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, which Biden said will benefit the people of Pakistan in areas such as energy, agriculture and communications.

“This means that you will soon see more dams providing more electricity and irrigation; crop yields that are higher; more hospitals providing services to the people of Pakistan, among other tangible benefits,” he said.

As another example of the sustained U.S.-Pakistan

partnership, the vice president noted the United States has established the largest Fulbright program in the world in Pakistan, calling it “a long-term investment in the dynamism” of young Pakistanis.

Additionally, he said the two countries have partnered recently through increased security cooperation and combined efforts to recover from Pakistan’s devastating floods in July 2010. The United States has committed nearly \$600 million to flood recovery efforts and announced a new \$190 million contribution for flood-affected families January 6. The new commitment is funded through the Kerry-Lugar-Berman legislation with which the U.S. Congress authorized \$7.5 billion in assistance projects for Pakistan.

Biden said a close partnership with Pakistan is vital to U.S. interests, and called on leaders of both countries to build on progress made in 2010 by rededicating to “what still must be achieved together.”

“We want what you want: a strong, stable, prosperous, democratic Pakistan at peace with itself and with its neighbors, including India. We want that not just for your sake, but we wish your success because it’s in our own interest. It’s in the interest of the entire region, and I would argue the entire world,” Biden said.

Middle East Looking for Leadership and Reform, Secretary Clinton Says

By Stephen Kaufman
Staff Writer

Washington — The people and leaders of the Middle East must work together to build a stronger foundation for their region, which is demanding economic and political reform, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton told political, business and civil society leaders in Doha, Qatar.

Speaking January 13 at the seventh Forum for the Future, Clinton said the people of the Middle East “are looking for real leadership in the 21st century, and I think it can be provided, and I know that this is the moment to do so.”

Through vision, strategy and commitment, “you can help build a future that your young people will believe in, stay for, and defend,” she said. “It is time to see civil society not as a threat, but as a partner. And it is time for the elites in every society to invest in the futures of their own countries.”

Founded in 2004, Forum for the Future is an initiative between the countries of the Middle East and North Africa and the Group of 8 major industrialized economies. It provides an opportunity for officials from government, civil society and the private sector to discuss political and economic reforms aimed at promoting greater freedom,

democracy and economic growth in the region.

With a growing majority of people under the age of 30, Clinton said that across the region “one in five young people is unemployed,” and in some places “the percentage is far more.”

Recalling her discussions with leaders and average citizens alike, Clinton said that while the people of the region are deeply proud of what the Middle East has accomplished, they are also concerned about the future.

“While some countries have made great strides in governance, in many others, people have grown tired of corrupt institutions and a stagnant political order. They are demanding reform to make their governments more effective, more responsive and more open. And all this is taking place against a backdrop of depleting resources: Water tables are dropping, oil reserves are running out and too few countries have adopted long-term plans for addressing these problems,” she said.

The region is in need of “firmer ground,” Clinton said. “I believe that the leaders of this region, in partnership with their people, have the capacity to build that stronger foundation,” by drawing on positive examples and models already at work in the Middle East to create jobs, improve education, make political reforms, and foster a greater respect for diversity.

She praised innovations, grass-roots-level economic and educational programs, and development projects she had seen during her current trip, which has taken her to the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Oman, as well as Qatar.

“I am here to pledge my country’s support for those who step up to solve the problems that we and you face,” she said. The United States wants to build stronger partnerships with those who are working to bring long-term stability and progress, and knows that “what happens in this region will have implications far beyond.”

Those who oppose reforms or cling to the status quo may be able temporarily to “hold back the full impact of their countries’ problems.” But Clinton warned that if leaders fail to offer meaningful opportunities for their young people and do not present a positive vision, people such as violent extremists and others who would “prey on desperation and poverty” will instead “fill the vacuum.”

The rising generation of Middle Eastern youth “has the potential to achieve so much,” and “we need to give them the chance to do so,” the secretary said.

“What we need is a real vision for that future that comes from each of you, from governments that must deliver on

their promises, from civil society and business leaders who must build their people up, and of course, from the people themselves,” Clinton said.

Secretary Gates Urges Support for Peace on Korean Peninsula

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — Peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula are in the common interest of China, Japan, South Korea and the United States, Defense Secretary Robert Gates says.

“This requires that [North Korea] cease its belligerent behavior and its provocations that have killed innocent victims, both military and civilian, in Korea,” Gates said at a January 13 press conference in Tokyo with Japanese Defense Minister Toshimi Kitazawa. Gates is meeting with political and defense leaders in China, Japan and South Korea during a five-day mission across Northeast Asia.

While the United States supports negotiations and direct engagement between North Korea and South Korea, Gates said there must also be “concrete evidence” on North Korea’s part that it is serious about resuming Six-Party negotiations. While still in China, Gates said that evidence could include an end to nuclear weapons testing and the test-firing of ballistic missiles.

The Six-Party Talks — chaired by China and including Japan, North Korea, South Korea, Russia and the United States — aim to convince the North Korean regime to forgo its nuclear weapons program and to eliminate nuclear programs from the Korean Peninsula.

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula were heightened in March 2010 when a South Korean naval vessel was sunk after being struck by a North Korean torpedo in the Yellow Sea, killing 46 sailors. Then in November 2010, North Korea fired more than 200 artillery shells on a South Korean fishing community on Yeonpyeong Island, which lies about 11 kilometers off the coast of North Korea. Four South Koreans were killed in the artillery barrage — two marines and two civilians.

“I think the key on the Korean Peninsula, as I discussed in China and discussed here in Japan, is to prevent another provocation from happening,” Gates told reporters. “We have seen this cycle over and over again, and I think the objective that we all have in common is how do we prevent another provocation from taking place.”

During their meeting, Gates and Kitazawa agreed to strengthen the U.S.-Japan security alliance, and discussed potentially exporting to allies the anti-missile capabilities

under joint development by both countries.

And Gates and Kitazawa agreed to work on relocating the U.S. Marine Corps air station at Futenma on the island of Okinawa with a shared commitment to reduce the impact of the U.S. military presence on local inhabitants while maintaining the U.S. commitment to Japan's security.

"We do understand that it is politically a complex matter in Japan, and we intend to follow the lead of the Japanese government in working with the people of Okinawa to take their interests and their concerns into account, and that obviously needs to happen," Gates told reporters.

American Muslims Remain Committed to Rebuilding Haiti

By M. Scott Bortot
Staff Writer

Washington — After last year's devastating earthquake in Haiti, American Muslim relief groups dashed to the quake zone to help victims with food, shelter and medicine. Today, Islamic Relief USA and the Zakat Foundation of America continue to serve the immediate needs of Haitians while developing programs to help them sustain themselves.

Doing so, though, has not been easy.

Asma Yousef, a spokeswoman for Islamic Relief USA, said security concerns hamper relief efforts and U.N. vehicles often shuttle aid workers from one area to another.

"We do understand that this is part of the risk inherent in our line of work worldwide, and in Haiti in particular," she said.

Along with security, transportation poses challenges that require creative strategies and lots of cooperative effort. Partnerships are key. Khalil Demir, of the Zakat Foundation, described how his organization had to deal with a slowdown at the Haitian border: "Eventually, we had to call churches in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti to open the truck and distribute everything at the border," Demir said.

In the past year, the American Muslim relief groups have responded to ever-changing needs on the ground. When a cholera outbreak erupted after Hurricane Tomas hit Haiti at the beginning of November 2010, they developed programs to help fight the disease, which has claimed nearly 4,000 lives.

Islamic Relief provides fresh water and training on cholera prevention at its Port-au-Prince and Carrefour camps. A recently approved \$100,000 grant through

Islamic Relief will support a cholera-prevention education program.

"We provide wash water used for washing dishes, clothes and bathing that is separate from safe drinking water for the inhabitants," Yousef said. Islamic Relief uses "community mobilizers" to check "tent by tent" for any water-related problems in the camps. "We also distribute hygiene kits to camp inhabitants, which include soap, toilet paper, toothpaste, hand sanitizers and a bucket."

The Zakat Foundation responded to the cholera outbreak by buying 1,000 water purifiers, made in Haiti, for distribution. However, the manufacturing capacity there is not enough to meet demand: Demir said that it would take months for Haitians to fill an order for 5,000 purifiers. He said he plans to help Haitians form a company to meet the need.

"Why can we not invest in a company, to create a company, which builds all of these? Because the water problem is not going to go away," Demir said. "The company itself should be a cooperative, with whatever it produces going toward community development."

Demir's organization already had operations in Haiti before the earthquake. Since 2008, in coordination with St. Clare's Church in Port-au-Prince, it has been helping to feed several hundred orphans. After the quake, the Zakat Foundation expanded its programs to help feed up to 200 more children at other orphanages. A report released January 7 by UNICEF said 380,000 children remain displaced.

As they tend to immediate humanitarian needs, both organizations are creating programs that should make it possible for more Haitians to support themselves.

Three months after the quake, the Zakat Foundation purchased a tractor for the Haitian Farm Cooperative in central Haiti and donated thousands of seeds. With Zakat support, the 60-acre cooperative dug a well to supply water during the country's dry season for its mango and banana trees.

"We are trying to give them the feeling you don't need to always expect that foreigners come and give you orders and money," Demir said. "We try to get them out of this circle and start thinking independently from our organization."

Yousef said Islamic Relief's contractors and administrative staff are Haitian citizens, which is "our way of helping Haitians become self-sufficient." A Haitian computer instructor, who provides vocational training to students at one of Islamic Relief's camps, recently improved his family's living conditions.

"In the aftermath of the earthquake, he lost his home and university job, as the university building never got rebuilt," Yousef said. "With wages he generated from his job with Islamic Relief, he was able to move out of Akra Nord camp, and rent a house for his family of five."

Islamic Relief's Cash for Work program is helping people earn an income while they clear rubble from their neighborhoods. Most estimates say only 5 percent of the some 20 million cubic feet of rubble has been cleared. To date, the Cash for Work program's 450 beneficiaries have cleared an estimated 20,000 tons of rubble from the Delmas 33 and Carrefour neighborhoods near Port-au-Prince.

"After a local community mobilizer designates an area for the project, Islamic Relief pays participants cash for clearing rubble from the location," Yousef said. "This project has employed a lot of women who otherwise had no other means of generating income for their families."

Partnerships continue to be vital for both American Muslim relief groups in Haiti. Shortly after the earthquake, the Zakat Foundation teamed with volunteer doctors from the Islamic Medical Association of North America to provide medical care for victims, and it continues a relationship with the Catholic Church to feed orphans. Islamic Relief cooperated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints to airlift \$300,000 worth of medicine, food and supplies just days after the quake, and its staff regularly meet with U.N. agencies to coordinate aid work.

For the work to go on, the Zakat Foundation and Islamic Relief continue to appeal for funding on their websites.

"One important message we try to convey to our donors is that work in Haiti is far from being done," Yousef said. "Education-centered projects and income-generating initiatives are direly needed."

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