

American

NEWS & VIEWS

A Weekly Newsletter from Public Affairs, American Embassy

February 10, 2012

Visiting Journalists Learn About U.S. Political Process	1
New NASA Data Offer Greater Detail in Earth Ice Depletion	2
Secretary Clinton Welcomes Burmese Civil Society Delegation to United States	3
U.S. Harnesses Innovation for Global Development	3
U.S. Looks to Deepen Philippine Trade, Security Ties	4
Bernanke Urges U.S. Leaders to Cut National Debt	4
Biotech Adoption Rates Highest Ever	5
President Obama Orders Stricter Sanctions Against Iran	6
Health Organization Aims to Eliminate Neglected Tropical Diseases	7
U.S. “Disgusted” by Security Council Inaction on Syria Peace Plan	8
U.S. Unemployment Drops to Lowest Level Since 2009	8

Visiting Journalists Learn About U.S. Political Process

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 09 February 2012

Washington — When Americans go the polls November 6 to choose their president, 22 journalists from around the world will be watching with a new understanding of how the candidates were selected to compete for America's highest office.

The journalists, through a program sponsored by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, visited seven U.S. cities between January 9 and January 20 to observe campaign operations, talk with voters and hear about the electoral process from experts.

Some were surprised by what they learned. Cecil Wentum, assistant program controller at the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, said he learned that Americans with different opinions have the right to openly express their concerns. In Manchester, New Hampshire, he saw supporters of opposing Republican candidates gather near the area where candidate Newt Gingrich rallied support during a typical town hall meeting — this one held at a small restaurant with mostly Latino customers.

At the site of a New Hampshire televised candidates' debate, Occupy movement members were vocal about their views, yet "polite" to onlookers, said Federico Ibañez, a reporter for Infobae América in Argentina.

Ibañez learned about America's Electoral College, a system in which Americans vote for electors who pledge to vote for a presidential candidate. The number of electors corresponds to the number in a state's congressional delegation.

He also learned how important gun ownership is to many New Hampshire residents. "They have guns not because they are violent but because they see ownership as a freedom," he said.

In Tampa, Florida, the entire group met with a commissioner of elections and learned the steps in the voting process and how voting machines are used to register and tally votes.

The journalists then split into three groups — with one going to Des Moines, Iowa; one to Little Rock, Arkansas; and one to Indianapolis, Indiana — before reuniting in Washington.

CAMPAIGN COSTS, SALARIES SURPRISE

A surprise for Mario Cruz, managing editor of Excelsior newspaper in Mexico City, was that candidates "can spend as much as they want on television ads within

campaign spending regulations."

The range of salaries for elected officials also was a revelation. For instance, Cruz learned that in New Hampshire, state legislators earn only \$100 a year (basically a volunteer post), while Florida pays its legislators about \$30,000 a year.

Vitor Abdala, a reporter for Agência Brasil, said he was impressed that some Americans travel far from their homes to show their support of candidates. He said he met one woman who came from her southern U.S. home to show her support for Ron Paul just before the Republican primary election in the northern state of New Hampshire.

Mahmoud Addanou, foreign affairs editor of Alray Alaam newspaper in Sudan, had a similar observation. "I asked one woman why she was out in the cold in the early morning showing her support for a candidate. No one paid her," he said. "She said she's a volunteer who wants to participate." He added that in the future he will look back on his experiences in the United States as inspiration to encourage people to participate in their communities.

İdil Güngör, a television correspondent for Al-Jazeera in Ankara, Turkey, observed that the economy could be a deciding topic in the election. "People are looking for a larger vision for the future," she said. Güngör learned that face-to-face communication is valued. "It's important for Americans to shake hands," she observed.

Many of the journalists said the experience would inform their coverage of American politics, but many also found broader value. For instance, Wentum brought recording equipment from Ghana and interviewed Americans he met for a documentary he planned to make when he returned home.

American volunteerism was a key element of the trip, which coincided with celebrations of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. The birthday of King, an influential civil rights leader of the 1960s, is celebrated as a national day of community service in January.

On that day, Ibraheem Shehu Musa, Kaduna bureau chief of Media Trust Newspapers Limited in Nigeria, joined others in his group and members of his host community to volunteer at a Salvation Army facility in Little Rock.

"We passed out food to the homeless, did the dishes and mopped the floors," he said. "It was a very humbling experience." When he returns home to Kaduna, he wants to organize people "to say 'look, we don't have to rely on the government for everything. We can volunteer.'"

New NASA Data Offer Greater Detail in Earth Ice Depletion

By Charlene Porter | Staff Writer | 09 February 2012

Washington – Satellite observations accumulated over a seven-year period show that the volume of Earth's land ice mass decreased by 4.3 trillion tons (more than 4,150 cubic kilometers) and increased global sea level by 12 millimeters.

That's enough ice to cover the entire United States to a half-meter depth.

A research team at the University of Colorado reached these conclusions based on satellite measurements collected from 2003 to 2010 by the NASA/German Aerospace Center Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment (GRACE).

"Earth is losing a huge amount of ice to the ocean annually, and these new results will help us answer important questions in terms of both sea rise and how the planet's cold regions are responding to global change," said University of Colorado-Boulder physics professor John Wahr, who helped lead the study.

Greenland and Antarctica, the planet's two greatest ice masses, account for roughly 75 percent of Earth's total land ice. Because of their size, they have been the focus of previous research, and decreases in their size have been documented. The more difficult scientific task has been to assess the changing sizes of some 200,000 smaller glaciers around the planet in the Himalayas, the Alps and the Andes, for example.

Previously, these ice masses have been measured with ground-based methods, and those findings have been used as the basis for inferences of the expansion or contraction of an entire glacier. The data used in this analysis – collected by dual satellites of the Gravity Recovery and Climate Experiment – show that the traditional methods produced inaccurate results.

Earlier estimates calculated that the high Central Asian mountains – the Himalaya, the Pamir and the Tien Shan – were losing up to 50 billion tons of ice annually. The GRACE measurements revealed a loss of only 4 billion tons annually. One possible explanation for the discrepancy, the University of Colorado team reports, may be that estimates based on ice loss measurements at the bottom of the glacier did not take into account the much colder temperatures at greater elevations up the mountains.

"The results sharpen our view of land ice melting, which poses the biggest, most threatening factor in future sea level rise," said Tom Wagner, cryosphere program

scientist at NASA headquarters in Washington.

EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN THE ARCTIC

Melting ice is opening new channels through Arctic waters. This is expected to lead to greater shipping traffic and greater risks of accidents that could spill oil or other toxins into the region's waters. U.S. maritime agencies are preparing with better tools to mount a speedy response to accidents, minimize damage and contain environmental impact.

By this summer, a new mapping tool, first used in the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, will be available to federal responders in the Arctic. The Environmental Response Management Application (ERMA®) pulls together and processes real-time and static data in a single interactive map, providing a clear visualization of the overall situation and improving communication and coordination among responders trying to control and contain the problem.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement in the Department of the Interior are working together to modify the tool for use in the Arctic.

"Launching this tool for responders, media and the public during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was a groundbreaking technical achievement and one of the most significant contributions NOAA provided to the historic, large-scale response," said NOAA Under Secretary Monica Medina.

With this action, the United States is working toward a goal adopted by the Arctic Council to increase response capabilities in the event of an environmental accident. The United States is one of eight member states in the Arctic Council, committed to limiting and reducing emissions of pollutants into the region's environment.

The other Arctic States are Canada, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, and Sweden. Six international organizations representing Arctic indigenous peoples also have permanent participant status.

SCIENCE-BASED DECISIONMAKING IN THE ARCTIC

Obama administration officials February 7 reaffirmed their commitment to base energy-related decisions in the Arctic on the best available science. Representatives of the White House and the Department of the Interior were in Anchorage, Alaska, to announce the ERMA® initiative and other mechanisms to draw the most accurate and timely information from the energy industry and research scientists as development decisions are weighed.

The announcements “demonstrate that collecting, synthesizing and delivering relevant information to decisionmakers is a top priority for this administration,” said Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes in remarks to the Alaska Forum on the Environment.

Secretary Clinton Welcomes Burmese Civil Society Delegation to United States

Media Note
Office of the Spokesperson
Washington, DC

February 8, 2012

At the State Department today, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton greeted Burmese comedian and recently-released former political prisoner Zaganar, National League for Democracy women’s empowerment activist Khin Than Myint, and National Democratic Front Kachin ethnic minority rights activist Daw Bauk Gyar. The visitors discussed political prisoners, women’s rights, and the situation of ethnic minorities in Burma with senior officials. Secretary Clinton previously met Zaganar in Rangoon where he participated in a civil society roundtable in December 2011. This is the delegation’s first visit to the United States.

U.S. Harnesses Innovation for Global Development

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 08 February 2012

Washington — Private sector and government leaders gathered at the White House February 8 to highlight progress in using science, technology and innovation to address global challenges.

They heard about several new public-private partnerships to accelerate progress toward development goals in health, agriculture, education, climate change, energy and economic growth. The partnerships will tap the idealism and expertise of university students and faculty to find new solutions to development challenges, speed the commercialization of scientific breakthroughs for humanitarian purposes and use communication technologies to accelerate research and innovation, according to a White House fact sheet.

“A core part of my global development strategy is harnessing the creativity and innovation of all sectors of our society to make progress that none of us can achieve alone,” President Obama said in the fact sheet. The president launched his global development policy in fall 2010.

New partnerships include the following:

- The University of California at Berkeley will adopt a

National Institutes of Health model of pre-negotiated terms for nonprofits to use in licensing technologies to diagnose, prevent or treat tropical diseases, tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS. Pre-negotiated terms can reduce costs and promote collaboration among universities, industry and the nonprofit sector to find solutions that can be used in developing countries.

- The Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory is working with nonprofit partners to create a pipeline to demand-driven technologies by matching the lab’s advanced research capabilities in affordable, low-carbon solutions with the needs of developing countries.

- To make the greatest use of scientific breakthroughs, the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office’s Patents for Humanity program will award patent applicants who demonstrate how their technology can be used for humanitarian purposes. The American Bar Association will inform its members of the program and the law firm Baker & McKenzie will train patent holders and their lawyers about humanitarian-use licenses for lifesaving intellectual property. The Department of Energy will offer licenses to nonprofits that provide access to clean technologies and services. Scientists Without Borders, PepsiCo and other partners will award a prize for the invention of new packaging for widely distributed micronutrient powders to undernourished recipients.

- In agriculture, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has partnered with the nonprofit CABI to bring together diagnostic, treatment and distribution information on crops, pests and diseases. CABI’s Plantwise initiative brings the best worldwide data on crops to farmers in the developing world.

- USDA also has partnered with Bioversity International and the Global Crop Diversity Trust to launch a global plant gene bank that enables researchers to source crop breeding materials with specific traits. Similarly, the National Institutes of Health is developing Global Health Connect, a free online database of disease information that can be used to develop new lifesaving treatments.

- The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is also organizing an alliance to teach literacy using mobile devices and another to build an “app store,” creating a marketplace for ideas and applications of development- and humanitarian-oriented software.

“The new collaborations we’re launching today will help save lives from hunger and disease, lift people from poverty and reaffirm America’s enduring commitment to the dignity and potential of every human being,” Obama said in the fact sheet.

U.S. Looks to Deepen Philippine Trade, Security Ties

08 February 2012

Washington — The United States seeks a revitalized alliance with the Philippines to meet the challenges of the 21st century, including more enhanced security and economic ties, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell told U.S. lawmakers.

Speaking in prepared testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade February 7, Campbell said the two countries are writing a "new chapter" in their relationship and "turning the page from a legacy of paternalism to a partnership of equals."

"We must ensure that our alliance remains nimble, adaptive, and flexible in order to meet changing global and regional dynamics. We are also resolute in our determination to promote economic cooperation, advance people-to-people ties, and combat corruption," Campbell said.

The United States and the Philippines want to ensure freedom of navigation, unencumbered commerce and respect for international law in the South China Sea, which has been the focal point of tensions due to overlapping territorial claims.

"While the United States takes no position on the competing sovereignty claims over islands in the South China Sea, our goal ... is to support a collaborative diplomatic process by all claimants to resolve their disputes without coercion," Campbell said. "We believe all parties should pursue and clarify their territorial claims and accompanying rights to maritime space in accordance with international law, including as reflected in the 1982 Law of the Sea Convention."

Both countries are cooperating to deter threats such as nuclear proliferation and terrorism, as well as countering al-Qaida-linked groups that are operating in the southern Philippines, he said.

In August 2011, the United States transferred a former U.S. Coast Guard cutter to the Philippine navy, and the vessel is now "enhancing the Philippines' maritime security in countering traditional and non-traditional threats, including terrorism, illegal fishing, and natural disasters," he said. Campbell added that in the coming months the Obama administration hopes to transfer a second cutter "as well as support other improvements in its surveillance and detection capabilities."

Campbell praised Philippine President Benigno Aquino's ongoing campaign against corruption, which he said is beginning to result in the public disclosure of violations,

new oversight and greater public antagonism to cronyism.

"If President Aquino and his administration remain committed on this track, I firmly believe the Philippines can continue to improve its global standing, its ranking in the various indices of corruption, and its chances of attracting job-creating investment by American and international companies," he said.

The United States is currently the Philippines' Number 2 trading partner, as well as one of its largest foreign investors. Campbell said increased economic cooperation through programs like the Millennium Challenge Account and the Trans-Pacific Partnership will help Filipinos benefit from sustained and broad-based economic growth.

"With growth come jobs, and a person with a steady job has a stake in the economy, a stake in a stable society, and a stake in an honest government that offers services such as health care and education to their families," he said.

Bernanke Urges U.S. Leaders to Cut National Debt

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 07 February 2012

Washington — Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke is calling on U.S. leaders to achieve economic and financial stability by putting the United States' fiscal policy on a sustainable path that ensures steady reduction of public debt.

Calling shrinking the U.S. deficit "a top priority," Bernanke said fiscal policymakers should address fiscal sustainability while being careful to avoid unnecessarily impeding the current economic recovery.

"Fortunately, the two goals of achieving long-term fiscal sustainability and avoiding additional fiscal headwinds for the current recovery are fully compatible. Indeed, they are mutually reinforcing," Bernanke said in testimony before the Senate Budget Committee in Washington February 7.

The chairman said a more robust recovery will lead to lower deficits and debt, and a plan for fiscal sustainability will keep longer-term interest rates low and improve household and business confidence, thereby supporting improved economic performance in the short term.

"Fiscal policymakers can also promote stronger economic performance in the medium term through the careful design of tax policies and spending programs," Bernanke said. He called for new tax and spending policies to increase incentives to work and save, encourage investments in workers' skills, stimulate private growth, promote research and provide necessary public

infrastructure.

“Although we cannot expect our economy to grow its way out of its fiscal imbalances, a more productive economy will ease the trade-offs that we face and increase the likelihood that we leave a healthy economy to our children and grandchildren,” Bernanke said.

The chairman commended the U.S. economy’s gradual recovery from deep recession since 2009, but he said that even though “conditions have certainly improved over this period, the pace of the recovery has been frustratingly slow” for the millions unemployed.

“Fortunately, over the past few months, indicators of spending, production and job market activity have shown some signs of improvement,” Bernanke said.

He cited economic projections released in late January by the Federal Open Market Committee, the policymaking arm of the U.S. central bank, as pointing to stronger growth in 2012 than in 2011, but said the outlook remains uncertain and close monitoring of economic developments is still needed.

The committee’s economic and policy projections are subject to future revision in light of evolving economic and financial conditions, the chairman said, adding the Federal Reserve Board will continue to monitor economic conditions and adjust its policies accordingly.

Biotech Adoption Rates Highest Ever

By Kathryn McConnell | Staff Writer | 07 February 2012

Washington — Agricultural biotechnology continues to grow around the world at unprecedented rates, with 8 percent more biotech hectares planted in 2011 than in 2010, according to a major international research group.

During 2011, 160 million hectares were planted in crops developed through biotechnology, a 94-fold increase over hectares planted in 1996, when biotech crops first were commercialized. Farmers in 29 countries, including 19 developing countries, planted and replanted a total of 1.25 billion hectares of biotech crop land between 1996 and 2011 — an area 25 percent larger than the total land mass of the United States and China, said Clive James, author of an annual biotech crop report released February 7 by the research group International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA).

“That makes biotechnology the fastest-adopted agricultural technology in history,” James said. “It reflects the confidence small-, medium- and large-size farmers have in biotech,” he added.

The report, *Global Status of Commercialized Biotech/GM*

Crops: 2011, was launched via a worldwide webcast to journalists.

From 1996 to 2010, biotech crops contributed significantly to food security and environmental protection, James said. Biotech crop production increases are valued at more than \$78 billion. Requiring less pesticide use and tilling, biotech crops have saved hundreds of kilograms of pesticides from entering the soil and water, and reduced carbon emissions.

HIGH ADOPTION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Developing countries, which represent 40 percent of the world’s population, are adopting biotech twice as fast as industrialized countries. In 2011, biotech crops grown in developing countries for the first time were close to half of global crops grown, James said.

While the United States continued to be the lead producer of biotech crops in 2011 with 69 million hectares planted, Brazil was second with 30.3 million hectares planted. It is followed by Argentina at 23.7 million hectares and India at 10.6 million hectares. Rounding out the top 10 countries that each grew more than 1 million hectares of biotech crops were Canada, China, Paraguay, Pakistan, South Africa and Uruguay.

“We expect Brazil to be the leader in planting biotech soybeans and maize,” James said, noting that Brazil is bringing more land into arable production and is expected to devote a large portion of that to biotech.

ACCEPTANCE BY OTHER COUNTRIES

In 2011, six countries in the European Union planted biotech maize, 26 percent more than in 2010. Two more European countries planted a high-starch biotech variety of potato. Sixty countries accept biotech crops for import for food and feed use, including major food importers like Japan, which does not plant biotech crops.

NEW VARIETIES

The rate of new variety development has accelerated in recent years, and stacked traits are an important feature, James said. Twelve countries planted crops with two or more traits in 2011; nine of those were developing countries. A stacked variety carries more than one beneficial trait.

In 2012, a stacked soybean that resists insects and is herbicide tolerant will be introduced in Brazil and is expected to be released in Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina, James said.

In 2013, the first variety of drought-tolerant maize will be

grown in the United States. In either 2013 or 2014, a “golden rice” enhanced with Vitamin A will be introduced in the Philippines and then in Bangladesh, saving millions from death or blindness every year, according to James.

Also in 2014, a variety of soybeans containing healthy omega-3 oils will be introduced worldwide, he said.

The United States works with ISAAA and other international research groups to encourage the adoption of proved technologies, including biotechnology that produce more per hectare while using less water, fewer herbicides and pesticides, and less energy.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

The years to 2015, the target world leaders set in 2000 to cut hunger in half, look “encouraging” for biotech, James said. Experts say that beyond that, the world needs to produce 70 percent more food by 2050 to meet the needs of a population that the United Nations estimates will be more than 9 billion.

Biotech will be an important tool in meeting those needs, James said.

President Obama Orders Stricter Sanctions Against Iran

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer | 06 February 2012

Washington — President Obama ordered stricter sanctions be imposed on Iran and its central bank for noncompliance with its international obligations to halt development of nuclear weapons.

Obama told Congress February 6 that more sanctions were necessary because of deceptive practices by the Central Bank of Iran and other Iranian banks in trying to hide financial transactions of companies and government officials that already have been sanctioned over the country’s nuclear weapons development program. He also cited weaknesses in Iran’s regime to fight money-laundering, which pose an unacceptable risk to the international financial system.

“My goal is to try to resolve this diplomatically, mainly because the only way, over the long term, we can assure Iran doesn’t get a nuclear weapon is by getting them to understand it’s not in their interest,” Obama said in an interview with NBC News that aired on the Today show February 6. He added that the United States has a good estimate of when Iranian scientists and engineers could complete work on a fully functional nuclear weapon, based in part on where they are in the uranium enrichment process.

“Do we know all the dynamics inside Iran? Absolutely not,” Obama said. “And I think one of the difficulties is that Iran itself is a lot more divided now than it was.

“Knowing who is making decisions at any given time inside of Iran is tough. But we do have a pretty good bead on what’s happening with their nuclear program,” he added.

The executive order freezes Iranian assets as well as those of its Central Bank and all Iranian financial institutions held by U.S. banks and financial firms. The order was signed on February 5 and took effect shortly after midnight EST on February 6.

The United States and the European Union (EU) have strengthened sanctions in an effort to convince the Iranian regime to halt all uranium enrichment, a process essential for the construction of a nuclear weapon. The United States, working closely with the EU and other partners, has attempted to negotiate with Iran to halt the weapons development program and find ways to provide Iran with enriched uranium for civilian use.

Six nations — Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States — have attempted to convince Iran in a series of negotiations to forgo a nuclear development program, but talks halted and have not resumed.

Estimates indicate Iran has more than 3,000 kilograms of reactor-grade low-enriched uranium in stocks at its Natanz enrichment facility and facilities elsewhere in the country. That is enough material for at least a two nuclear weapons, according to previous International Atomic Energy Agency reports. Experts also estimate Iran has begun producing small quantities of uranium to a concentration of about 20 percent, another sign of progress toward nuclear weapons production.

The U.S. Treasury Department said that President Obama’s actions underscore his commitment and resolve to hold Iran accountable for its failure to meet international obligations and ensure it halts uranium enrichment, permits international inspectors to inspect all of Iran’s nuclear facilities, and gives up any efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

“Iran now faces an unprecedented level of pressure due to intensified sanctions applied by the United States and complementary actions by many others around the world,” the Treasury said in a prepared statement. “It will face ever-increasing economic and diplomatic pressure until it addresses the international community’s well-founded and well-documented concerns regarding the nature of its nuclear program.”

Health Organization Aims to Eliminate Neglected Tropical Diseases

By Mary-Katherine Ream | Staff Writer | 06 February 2012

Washington – The World Health Organization (WHO) is intensifying efforts to prevent, control and eliminate neglected tropical diseases, ailments that plague the developing world. The new WHO campaign aims to eradicate at least 10 of these illnesses by 2020.

In announcing the plan January 30, WHO Director-General Margaret Chan said it “represents the next step forward in relieving and, in many cases, finally ending the vast misery caused by these ancient diseases of poverty.”

Through partnerships with pharmaceutical companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and countries like the United States, WHO hopes to substantially diminish the international impact of these diseases.

Neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) afflict more than 1 billion people worldwide and result in a significant reduction in lives and livelihoods. Many of the diseases, which are transmitted through insect bites or contaminated water, can be prevented with simple measures like mosquito nets or drug treatments. In poor countries, however, even simple solutions can be too expensive or unavailable.

The plan outlines an international strategy closely aligned with the Obama administration’s Global Health Initiative (GHI). President Obama said: “We cannot simply confront individual preventable illnesses in isolation. The world is interconnected, and that demands an integrated approach to global health.”

The WHO document, entitled *Accelerating Work to Overcome the Global Impact of Neglected Tropical Diseases: A Roadmap for Implementation*, targets 17 NTDs ranging from dengue fever to soil-transmitted helminthiases. Each ailment is unique, differing in geographical distribution, method of transmission and impact on health.

For example, soil-transmitted helminthiases, commonly known as intestinal worms, spread through three different types of pests. Humans contract the infection by eating food, drinking water or walking on soil infested with diseased worm eggs. After a few weeks, they develop intestinal discomforts such as abdominal pain and diarrhea. Helminth infections are the most common in the world. WHO’s road map strives to contain the infection through preventative drug treatments and improved sanitation.

The report also recommends the mass administration of

medicine to suppress another NTD, lymphatic filariasis, or elephantiasis. This illness is transmitted through the bite of a mosquito infected with a filarial parasite. The infection causes abnormal swelling of body parts, severe pain and disability. WHO estimates that more than 120 million people are infected with this grossly disfiguring disease. The plan suggests controlling the mosquito population with pesticides and insect nets to help stem the spread of this disease.

Some NTDs are transmitted through human contact. Blinding trachoma is the leading cause of preventable blindness worldwide and is typically passed from child to child. Rabies, on the other hand, is transmitted from animal to human – usually through a bite. Some of these conditions, like leprosy, have agonized populations since biblical times.

To reduce the impact of these NTDs, WHO has developed a five-step implementation strategy for the impoverished areas where these diseases are endemic. The steps include preventive chemotherapy, intensified disease management, vector and host control, veterinary public health, and provision of safe water and sanitation.

The newly drawn WHO road map strives to prevent disease through safe, single-use medicines. When the diseases do occur, the report recommends early detection and better treatment. It also emphasizes the need to control the source of these diseases through improved sanitation, hygiene and animal care.

The United States is already taking aggressive steps against NTDs, similar to those recommended in the new WHO plan. Announced in 2009, President Obama’s Global Health Initiative (GHI) focuses on the health of women and children as well as infectious disease. According to the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), one of the initiative’s major goals is to “reduce the prevalence of 7 neglected tropical diseases by 50 percent among 70 percent of the affected population, and eliminate onchocerciasis in Latin America by 2016, lymphatic filariasis globally by 2017, and leprosy.”

To achieve these goals, the president secured significant financial support. In his FY 2012 budget request to Congress, President Obama called for \$100 million to fight NTDs. This request represents a 30 percent increase from 2011 and underscores the United States’ commitment to the eradication of these diseases.

The United States is bolstering its financial support by collaborating with other global health organizations. American pharmaceutical companies such as Gilead, Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer are all donating medicine. Merck, for example, is providing an unlimited supply of

one treatment for as long as it is needed. American NGOs are also contributing to the effort. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is providing \$363 million over five years for product and operational research.

WHO and the United States hope to extend the momentum gained from the first Global Partners' Meeting in 2007, where NTDs received a high global priority. Since then, the incidence of most of these diseases has been reduced through greater access to treatment and better methods of control.

U.S. "Disgusted" by Security Council Inaction on Syria Peace Plan

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr. | Staff Writer | 04 February 2012

Washington – U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice told the U.N. Security Council February 4 that "the United States is disgusted" by the failure of the council to pass a resolution that backed an Arab League peace plan to end escalating violence in Syria and that urged Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down.

China and Russia, both permanent members of the Security Council, vetoed the peace plan resolution, while the United States and 12 other members that included Britain and France voted for it in a rare weekend session.

"The United States is disgusted that a couple of members of this council continue to prevent us from fulfilling our sole purpose here – addressing an ever-deepening crisis in Syria and a growing threat to regional peace and security," Rice said shortly after the council voted.

A Security Council resolution can be blocked by a single veto from the five permanent members, which are Great Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States. However a double veto by Security Council permanent members is rare.

The vote was prompted, even in the face of Russian opposition, by continued violence in the city of Homs and amid reports that nearly 250 civilian Syrians were killed February 3 by government forces. The United Nations estimates that more than 5,400 civilians have been killed in the nearly 11-month-old civil strife as the Assad regime conducted a military crackdown on all civilian protests.

Rice, who is the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, said the text of the resolution did not include sanctions, an arms embargo or a call for international intervention in Syria, but only for a plan to halt the violence and end the Assad regime.

"These members [China and Russia] stand behind empty arguments and individual interests, while delaying and

seeking to strip bare any text that would pressure Assad to change his actions. This intransigence is even more shameful when you consider that at least one of these members continues to deliver weapons to Assad," Rice said.

At an international security conference in Munich, Germany, February 4, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said that the United States and European nations "are united, alongside the Arab League, in demanding an end to the bloodshed and a democratic future for Syria." Clinton met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the conference to discuss the then-pending vote of the Security Council. Clinton addressed the Security Council on the resolution January 31.

The Arab League peace plan called for Assad's regime to withdraw its military forces from residential areas, stop acts of violence against civilians, release opposition prisoners arrested because of the current unrest, end all fighting and bloodshed, delegate power to the vice president and allow creation of a national government of unity. Assad had signed a protocol with the Arab League pledging to meet the conditions set in the plan.

Before the vote was taken in New York, President Obama said that 30 years after Assad's father "massacred tens of thousands" of Syrian civilians in Hama, the current Assad regime has demonstrated a similar disdain for human life and dignity.

"The Syrian regime's policy of maintaining power by terrorizing its people only indicates its inherent weakness and inevitable collapse," Obama said. "Assad has no right to lead Syria, and has lost all legitimacy with his people and the international community."

Obama pledged continued U.S. support for the Syrian people and vowed to continue working to help them build a better future in Syria.

"Every government has the responsibility to protect its citizens, and any government that brutalizes and massacres its people does not deserve to govern," Obama said.

U.S. Unemployment Drops to Lowest Level Since 2009

By MacKenzie C. Babb | Staff Writer | 03 February 2012

Washington – The U.S. unemployment rate dropped to 8.3 percent in January as private sector employment rose for the 23rd consecutive month, signaling a strengthening job market and an improved economy, according to Labor Secretary Hilda Solis.

"January's employment numbers exceeded all forecasts and provide the strongest evidence yet that our economic

recovery is on track," Solis said in a February 3 statement. Her remarks followed the release of the monthly employment report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which showed the unemployment rate at its lowest level since February 2009.

Solis said the 257,000 private sector jobs added in January exceeded economists' expectations.

"We've created 3.7 million private-sector jobs over the last 23 months," the secretary said, adding that January's job growth was the strongest in nine months.

Alan Krueger, chairman of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, echoed the secretary's comments, calling the new report "evidence that the economy is continuing to heal from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression."

Solis highlighted the drop in the unemployment rate of 0.8 percentage points during the last five months, and said the falling rate has been "driven by employment gains, not workers leaving the labor force." The number of unemployed people declined to 12.8 million in January.

Solis said the report shows accelerated job growth across almost every industry, highlighting in particular the increase of 50,000 manufacturing jobs in January. She also cited encouraging growth in the construction sector, which has added 52,000 jobs during the past two months to mark the largest increase in construction since 2007.

The number of leisure and hospitality jobs increased, along with professional and business services. Government employment changed little during the month.

The report's release followed a statement by Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke on January 25 that the U.S. economy has continued to expand moderately despite some slowing in global growth.

The Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis reported January 27 that the U.S. economy grew by 2.8 percent from October 2011 to December 2011, the 10th straight quarter of positive growth, bringing expansion of U.S. gross domestic product up to 1.7 percent for 2011.

Krueger said while the latest employment and economic growth are encouraging, faster growth is needed to make up for jobs lost in the economic downturn.

(This is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov>)