



Weekly Special Report



Produced by the Public Affairs Section

INSIDE

USAID Provides Additional 87,910 Metric Tons of Emergency Food Aid



Addis Ababa: USAID has provided an additional 87,910 metric tons of emergency food aid, valued at approximately U.S. \$50 million, to the Joint Emergency Operational Plan in response to the Ethiopian Government’s January 2009 appeal. This emergency food aid will provide a full ration to 1.18 million beneficiaries for four months in 72 woredas in the most severely impacted regions – Afar, Amhara, Oromiya, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, and Tigray Regions and in Dire Dawa Administrative Council.

Catholic Relief Services will manage the assistance, which will be implemented by a consortium of NGOs including CARE, Food

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Obama Seeks \$1.42 Billion for Millennium Aid Agency in 2010

By Kathryn McConnell
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama is asking Congress for \$1.42 billion to fund the Millennium Challenge Corporation for the fiscal year beginning October 1, an increase of 63 percent over the current year’s funding.

The request shows that the administration sup-



Alicia Phillips Mandaville, a senior policy associate at the MCC.

ports MCC’s focus on anti-corruption in tackling global poverty, Alicia Phillips Mandaville, a senior policy associate at the MCC, said from Washington in a May 19 America.gov webchat.

MCC recently adopted a tougher policy for rating low-income and low-middle-income countries on how well they have adopted policies to pre-

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for the Hungry International, Relief Society of Tigray, Save the Children-UK, Save the Children-US, and World Vision.

This new donation, coupled with last month's announcement of 65,410 metric tons of cereals, pulses, vegetable oil and blended food to the World Food Program for

approximately two million beneficiaries for two months, brings the total U.S. assistance in response to the 2009 appeal to U.S. \$100 million.

The American people, through USAID, have a history of responding to the Government of Ethiopia's appeals. In 2008, USAID contributed approximately U.S. \$280 million in emergency food aid. In addition,

since 2005, USAID has provided U.S. \$150 million in food resources per year to the Ethiopian Government-led Productive Safety Net Program, supporting approximately 3 million beneficiaries in, Amhara, Oromiya, Somali, Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples, and Tigray Regions for four months.

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Obama Seeks \$1.42 Billion for Millennium Aid Agency in 2010 . . .

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vent, detect and remediate corruption. It uses governance indicators developed by the World Bank, data gathered through surveys of businesses and individuals about experiences with government corruption in their countries, and information from anti-corruption experts, Mandaville said.

Since 2005, MCC has spent about \$250 million through its "threshold program" supporting anti-corruption efforts in 14 countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Threshold assistance helps countries that are close to being eligible for MCC's larger-scale programs meet good-governance criteria.

The government of Zambia, for instance, used MCC threshold funding to identify ways to reduce corruption in customs offices — an improvement intended especially to benefit people moving goods across the country's borders, Mandaville said.

Paraguay used MCC threshold funding to reduce corruption among civil servants, improving citizens' ability

to comply with regulations for transactions such as registering a marriage or business, she said.

MCC also determines eligibility for aid using tough standards for rating how well a country has adopted economic-growth, environmental-protection and gender-equality policies, Mandaville said.

MCC is based in Washington and MCC-funded projects are managed by recipient countries through in-country Millennium Challenge Account offices. MCC coordinates its aid grants with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which provides technical expertise. MCC is headed by a chief executive officer appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate. A board of directors chaired by the secretary of state determines which countries MCC will work with and what projects will be funded.

Questions for Mandaville in the webchat were from America.gov users throughout the world. In response to one participant's question, Mandaville said incentives are more effective than sanctions or other "punishment" in helping coun-

tries to focus on improving in specific policy areas.

Also on May 19, the MCC board voted to authorize the termination of MCC's \$110 million, five-year poverty reduction grant agreement with Madagascar. The grant program has been on hold since the country experienced an undemocratic change of government earlier in 2009.

In a press release (<http://www.mcc.gov/press/releases/documents/release-051909-mccboardauthorizes.php>), MCC said that MCA-Madagascar will remain in operation long enough to ensure that the termination is orderly and does not endanger public health and safety or the environment. MCC is working to ensure that program assets, paid for with U.S. taxpayer funds, "are properly accounted for as part of this process," MCC said.

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

U.S. Africa Command Seeking Sustained Security Engagement

*By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer*

Washington — For African nations, the role of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) will be one of “sustained security engagement” as a more reliable partner across the continent, says Ambassador Mary Yates.

Before the creation of a separate military command for Africa, the United States’ military and security engagements on the continent had been episodic, Yates said in a recent Washington Foreign Press Center briefing. “We were not there in a constant form.”

“We hope that we will be able to garner enough resources to be able to be a more reliable partner with the African nations,” the veteran Foreign Service officer said May 12.

“This whole-of-government approach that we have begun at the Africa Command is a good role model as well, and I’m finding great receptivity.”

Yates, who is the AFRICOM deputy for civil-military activities, said the approach the command, which was created October 1, 2008, is taking will be to build the security capacity of its partners; promote strategic relationships; conduct civil-military activities that foster stability; and provide crisis response. She said this does not mean the command will have all the resources and all the programs needed, but by concentrating on Africa, effective and

workable partnerships can be created.

Africa Command grew out of the U.S. European Command, which had responsibility for 92 countries in Europe and Africa. The new command focuses entirely on Africa,

To be able to support international peace efforts and peacekeeping missions.

To gain the ability and will to dissuade, deter and defeat threats.



Africa Command General William Ward, left, meets with Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki.

with the one exception of Egypt, which is still partnered with the U.S. Central Command. Yates said Egypt is still very much an African nation and actively participates in the issues and challenges of the continent. When AFRICOM was created, Egyptian officials were consulted on the U.S. approach.

Yates said African militaries described what they wanted and expected from the new partnership:

To be able to employ capable military forces.

To strengthen their own security institutions.

“Those are the repeated themes that the African military has told us, so that informed our thinking,” Yates said.

Coupled with the military cooperation is the expanded civilian cooperation through the command with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the State and Treasury departments, and other agencies, she said.

“We’re working with the military as they plan their theater security cooperation program so the programs are more effective, so the humanitarian assistance is more effectively allocated and in support of what USAID is doing on the continent and what the State Department is doing on the continent,” Yates said. “What we want to do is find the African partners who are looking to build peace and stability in their nations and in their regions.”

What foreign affairs decisions should President Obama consider? Comment on America.gov’s blog (<http://blogs.america.gov/campaign/2009/01/21/day-2-what-should-obama%e2%80%99s-top-priorities-be/>). ♦

United States Aiding Victims of Gender-Based Violence in Africa

By **Jim Fisher-Thompson**
Staff Writer

Washington — The underlying issue of gender inequality that leads to violence against women in civil conflicts is a problem in many parts of the world, but there is a difference in “scope and intensity” of the violence in some African nations, a State Department official told Congress May 13.

Gender-based violence “as a tool of war is in no way limited to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan, or in Africa,” Ambassador Melanne Verveer told a joint hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on International Operations and Organizations, Human Rights, Democracy and Global Women’s Issues and the Subcommittee on African Affairs.

Verveer, the State Department’s ambassador-at-large for global women’s issues, was joined at the hearing by Ambassador Phil Carter, acting assistant secretary of the State Department’s Bureau of African Affairs, and Esther Brimmer, assistant secretary of state for international organization affairs.

“We’ve seen this in Bosnia, Burma, Sri Lanka, Nepal and elsewhere. The underlying problems — gender inequality and the dehumanization of women — are often the same,” Verveer told lawmakers.

In Africa, however, there is a difference in the intensity of the violence against women, the official said.

In the DRC, for example, a civil conflict in the nation’s eastern region is reaching its 12th year and, Verveer said, “The scale and enormity of the violence directed at women can scarcely be adequately described. Some 1,100 rapes are being reported each month, with



Melanne Verveer noted that the U.S has contributed millions to help victims of gender-based violence.

24 percent in nonconflict areas.”

Describing the violence against women in DRC as “horrifying,” Senator Russell Feingold, who co-chaired the joint hearing, said, “In the past few years there has been an increased focus on the urgent need to address these brutal tactics ... and the United States has an important role to play.”



USAID is working with NGOs to provide assistance in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

an average of 36 women and children raped every day.”

The perpetrators, Verveer said, in many cases are the security forces citizens expected to protect them. They include: “elements of the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Congolese National Police and illegal, nonstate armed groups that are reportedly responsible for 81 percent of reported cases in conflict zones and

are merely infants.”

“This must stop. ... We must come together across all the lines that normally divide us [politically] and ... end this madness,” Boxer said.

The U.S. government is doing its part to do just that, Verveer told lawmakers.

Since 2000, the State Department
(Continued on page 17)

Independent Electoral Commissions Strengthen Democracy in Africa

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
Staff Writer

Washington — Independent electoral commissions help African nations provide a level playing field during elections while building a foundation for the sustainability of democracy on the continent, democracy activists say.

David Shinn, former U.S. ambassador to Ethiopia (1996–1999) and Burkina Faso (1987–1990), said Africa’s democratic record has been mixed in recent decades, with periods of progress sometimes interrupted by flawed elections. “One of the encouraging developments is the growing willingness of the African Union and subregional organizations to condemn setbacks to the electoral process,” he said.

Despite challenges, Shinn told America.gov, “African governments and voting populations increasingly are emphasizing the importance of elections as part of their efforts to strengthen democracy.” This month’s election in South Africa is an example, he said.

Shinn, who is currently an adjunct professor at George Washington University’s Elliot School of International Affairs, said, “I cannot stress too strongly the importance of having a professional and totally independent national electoral commission.

“There is nothing easy about conducting a free and fair election in Africa — or any other part of the world, for that matter,” he added. “But it is imperative to have a professional, well-staffed and independent electoral commission to

establish election procedures, monitor the process and ensure a fair hearing of complaints.”

Ambassador Johnnie Carson, assistant secretary of state for African affairs, told an April 29 Senate hearing that “democracy is a process, not an event,” explaining that free and fair elections must become politically sustainable.

mental organization (NGO) that receives some U.S. government funding for democracy training in Africa, said the United States is making “a remarkable commitment” to providing long-term election assistance in Africa.

For example, Cyllah told America.gov, the U.S. Agency for International Development has pledged



Supporters of the winning candidate celebrate after Ghana's elections. A U.S. official described the election as free and fair.

During the past decade, he said, “the greatest progress [in Africa] has been made in the area of democracy and governance. The two most recent examples of this are to be found in Ghana and South Africa,” thanks in part to strong electoral watchdog institutions.

AMERICAN NGO’S HELP MONITOR AFRICAN ELECTIONS

Almami Cyllah, regional director for Africa programs at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), an independent, nongovern-

\$17.5 million for election training and support to Liberia over the next five years. It “is an extraordinary show of long-term support to democratization in Africa,” said Cyllah, who is from Sierra Leone.

Cyllah said if other nations also contribute to this commitment, “this will have a huge impact on the development of democracy in Africa.”

Cyllah said much of the U.S. funding will go to buttress the work of African electoral commissions, “an

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Independent Electoral Commissions Strengthen Democracy in Africa . . .

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indispensable institution in any election. Where you have strong, credible electoral commissions, you usually have strong, credible elections."

Ghana is an example of how an electoral commission can be effective in a hotly contested presidential contest, Cyllah said. The commission, which helped monitor the December 2008 election, "had earned credibility and independence through its hard work. The sitting president cannot fire its head. It has become truly independent, and that is a major reason why democracy is such a success in Ghana."

By strengthening electoral commissions, Cyllah said, "we help build the institutional capacity and political will to manage elections. Over time, we have built a cadre of more than 1,500 democracy and governance experts capable of addressing almost any election situation."

Other programs IFES has conducted with electoral commissions in Africa include these:

technical assistance to Angola's fledgling National Electoral Commission (CNE) for its 2008 elections, the first held in 16 years;

strengthening Guinea's Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), aimed at strengthening commissioners' operational capacity and commitment to electoral integrity on the national and local levels;

assistance to Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for its 2007 elections;

working with the Malawi Election Commission (MEC) in the period leading up to the nation's 2009 elections to develop a voter education and voter information campaign and detailed operational plan; and

partnering with the African Union (AU) on a newly established Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit (DEAU) aimed at supporting national electoral commissions by



Independent election commissions, like this one in Pretoria, South Africa, play a large role in strengthening democracy, activists say.

creating a pool of trained election monitoring experts.

Chris Fomunyoh, regional director for Central and West Africa at the National Democratic Institute, another NGO that promotes democracy in Africa, helped train election monitors and workers in Ghana before the election. He said, "Many independent observers would credit the success of the last [Ghanaian] election to the independence, impartiality, professionalism of the Independent Election Commission of Ghana."

Fomunyoh said civil society groups also play an important role in the election process. "Their involvement supports the credibility of

electoral commissions that perform well because their [commissions'] findings can be verified, making it easier for everyone to accept the election's outcome — and that's what happened in Ghana."

The electoral commission process also played an essential role in South Africa's recent election, according to Tebogo Kola, the South African Embassy's first secretary for public diplomacy.

Kola told America.gov, "The election proceeded very well and lived up to our high expectations," due in part to the work of the Independent

Electoral Commission (IEC), which served as a watchdog and referee over the voting process.

"The IEC is very important because it doesn't belong to any political party but lays down the rules for all parties and candidates, thus ensuring a free and fair election," he explained.

The involvement of American and other NGOs "gave us South Africans confidence to know that just 15 years after our democratic dispensation we could hold a free and fair election" and "be a beacon for democracy on the continent," Kola said. ♦

Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu Discuss Peace Process

By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer

Washington — President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapons program and strengthening the U.S.-Israeli relationship in their first meeting as heads of state.

Both Obama and Netanyahu acknowledged that for peace to be achieved, peace talks must resume.

"We have seen progress stalled on this front, and I suggested to the prime minister that he has an historic opportunity to get a serious movement on this issue during his tenure," Obama said at a brief press conference in the Oval Office of the White House May 18. "That means that all the parties involved have to take seriously obligations that they previously agreed to."

Obama said that he and Netanyahu discussed at length the need to restart negotiations and that it is in everyone's interests to achieve a lasting two-state solution.

"I think that there is no reason why we should not seize this opportunity and this moment," the president said.

The meeting between the two leaders went considerably beyond the scheduled time that also included a private luncheon.

Netanyahu said he wants "to start peace negotiations with the Palestinians immediately. I would like to broaden the circle of peace to include others in the Arab world. It's a distant vision, but one that we shouldn't let go."

But Netanyahu added that to secure a lasting peace, he believes the Palestinians will have to recognize Israel's permanent legitimacy. Within that context, Netanyahu said, "I

them that it is not in their interest to pursue a nuclear weapon and that they should change course," Obama said. Neither the United States nor Israel has accepted the explanation by Iranian officials that they are pursuing a peaceful, civilian nuclear development program.

Obama said he assured Netanyahu that the United States was not foreclosing a range of options for Iran, including stronger international sanctions.

"The worst danger we face is that Iran would develop nuclear military capabilities," Netanyahu said. "Iran openly calls for our destruction, which is unacceptable from any standard."

Obama said that from the outset of his administration, Israel's security has been of paramount importance to the United States and that it re-

mains essential to U.S. national security interests to assure Israel's security as an independent state.

Obama is scheduled to meet with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak on May 26 and with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas two days later. Negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians had resumed after the 2007 Annapolis Conference on Middle East peace, but sputtered to a halt last year. The president made the Israeli-Palestinian peace process a high priority for his administration and, immediately after taking office in

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President Obama, right, and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu held private White House talks.

think we can envision an arrangement where Palestinians and Israelis live side by side in dignity and security and in peace."

IRAN'S WEAPONS PROGRAM

Both Obama and Netanyahu said an Iran nuclear weapon would pose not only an immediate threat to Israel and the United States, but also would be, in Obama's words, "profoundly destabilizing" and "could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East."

"We are engaged in a process to reach out to Iran and persuade

U.S. Seeking Improved Relations with Western Hemisphere Nations

*By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer*

Washington — President Obama wants the United States to build a new cooperative approach to relations with other Western Hemisphere nations that is supported by the twin pillars of democratic governance and inclusive prosperity, says Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg.

“Informed by our past experiences, President Obama and Secretary [of State Hillary Rodham] Clinton are setting out to build a new approach of broad hemispheric cooperation designed to benefit all of our citizens in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean, from the more developed to most hard-pressed,” Steinberg said May 13 at the 39th annual Washington Conference on the Americas, held at the State Department.

“As we look at the Western Hemisphere today, we see a landscape transformed from the past, but one that has still not achieved its full potential.”

Since taking office in January, Obama has traveled to Canada and Mexico and attended the 5th Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, to listen to neighbors and partners, Steinberg said. He also met privately at the White House with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva before the G20 Financial Summit held in early April in London, both to talk about the upcoming summit and to talk about the Summit of the Americas that was held later in April. Vice President Biden traveled to Chile in March to participate in the Progressive Governance



President Obama, left, speaks with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez at the Summit of the Americas.

Conference and also met with Central American leaders, and Clinton visited Mexico, Haiti and the Dominican Republic to discuss the U.S. desire for improved relations in this hemisphere, he said. This shows that, from the start, the Obama administration has been trying to achieve a more cooperative and progressive relationship.

The Washington Conference on the Americas took its theme from the Summit of the Americas on renewing the promise of prosperity. The conference expanded talks on stimulating economic growth as nations grapple with the current economic crisis.

“As President Obama and Secretary Clinton have made clear, our partnership is based on a genuine willingness to listen and learn from our neighbors,” Steinberg said. “We recognize that we don’t have the answer to every problem, and that

past approaches and formulas have not always worked.”

Steinberg said that in advancing democracy in the hemisphere, the United States seeks a new beginning with Cuba, which has the lone nondemocratically elected government. Considerable discussion at the Summit of the Americas and in the Organization of American States has centered on reinstating Cuba’s membership in the OAS, though the United States has said Cuban leaders must move toward greater freedoms and human rights for their people.

“We’ve changed our policy in ways that we believe will advance liberty and create opportunities for the Cuban people,” Steinberg said. “We now allow Cuban Americans to visit the island more freely and provide resources to their families there.”

“The president has also made clear our willingness and our readiness to engage constructively with the Cuban government on a wide range of issues.” At the same time the president asks hemispheric friends to call for and support liberty, equality and human rights for the Cuban people, Steinberg said.

Shannon is stepping down as assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs. The president has nominated Arturo Valenzuela, a professor of government at Georgetown University in Washington, to be the next assistant secretary for the region.

What foreign affairs decisions should President Obama consider? Comment on America.gov’s blog (<http://blogs.america.gov/campaign/2009/01/21/day-2-what-should-obama%e2%80%99s-top-priorities-be/>). ♦

Celebrating Arab American Heritage Month

By Ahmed Mohamed
Staff Writer

Washington — Former President Jimmy Carter once said, “We have become not a melting pot, but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams.”

One small piece of that mosaic was evident May 3 in Gaithersburg, Maryland, where the city’s Multicultural Affairs Committee, along with the Arab American community of Montgomery County, Maryland, hosted an Arab American heritage cultural festival.

Previously, city officials declared April 2009 as Arab American Heritage Month in the city. The proclamation recognizes the Arab American community, celebrates its achievements and acknowledges that Arab Americans continue to make substantial contributions to life in Montgomery County.

Government officials, such as Representative Chris Van Hollen (Democrat from Maryland) and Gaithersburg Mayor Sidney Katz, participated in the festivities.

The festival featured a poetry reading by Arab American poet Mai Mashini, a choir performance by students of the Abjadiyah Arabic Language School and an address by Katz, who focused on Arab American achievements and the importance of commemorating the rich and diverse heritage of Arab Americans. Many Arab Americans were born in the United States. Many have been in the United States for generations and may not speak Arabic or dress in clothing common in Arab countries. The majority of Arab Americans are descendants of

the first wave of immigration, which began around 1875 and lasted until about 1920. A second wave of Arab immigrants arrived in the United States after 1940.

Although the term “Arab Americans” may include a highly diverse group of people, differing in ancestral origins, religious backgrounds and historic identities, Arab Americans share a heritage through a common language and cultural and political traditions, and these factors bind this community.

A new Zogby International poll found that there are 3.5 million Americans who identify themselves as Arab Americans or Americans who originally belonged to one of the 23 U.N. member countries of the Arab world.

Arab Americans have contributed to America in many different fields. One early example was the late James Jabara, a Korean War hero and U.S. Air Force colonel in World War II. Army officers like Major General Fred Safay fought alongside General George Patton and Brigadier General Elias Stevens served on the staff of General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Other prominent Arab Americans are veteran Congressmen Nick Joe Rahall II (West Virginia), Charles Boustany (Louisiana) and Darrell Issa (California), former Senator John E. Sununu (New Hampshire), and Ahmed Zewail, who received the Nobel Prize for chemistry (1999) and who was selected by President Obama to serve on the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology.

Samira Hussein and Habib Ghanim, the festival organizers, told America.gov that the festival first began in 1997 when Hussein asked then-County Executive Douglas Duncan

to designate a day to celebrate Arab American heritage. Duncan welcomed the idea, which was also supported by county council members at that time.

They also told America.gov that the Arab American Heritage Cultural Festival of Montgomery County, Maryland, will take place annually, and feature poetry readings, arts and crafts, performances of dance and music, Middle Eastern food, traditional clothing, henna, calligraphy, games and prizes.

Hussein has won awards for her community activism. As a result of her dedication and her negotiation skills, Montgomery County Public Schools now require all teachers to complete a 45-hour cultural sensitivity course. As a result of her work, Maryland also revised its testing policies to respect the religious observances of Muslim students.

Ghanim is the president of USA Halal Chamber of Commerce Inc., which certifies food as halal (meeting Islamic dietary standards), with the help of the Islamic Society of the Washington Area (ISWA). ISWA also provides social services such as family counseling, social events and activities, educational gatherings and financial aid, which are necessary for the well-being and prosperity of the community.

Jimmy Carter’s words capture the spirit of the festival: “We can have an America that encourages and takes pride in our ethnic diversity, our religious diversity, our cultural diversity — knowing that out of this pluralistic heritage has come the strength and the vitality and the creativity that has made us great and will keep us great.” ♦

Arab-American Service Day Now in Fifth Year

By Ahmed Mohamed
Staff Writer

Washington — “People who love their country can change it,” President Obama said in a recent speech. Community service is an American value, especially evident in the Arab-American community. A National Arab American Service Day will be held May 16 in cities throughout the United States.

The purpose is to foster leadership and community engagement through volunteerism and service. Thousands of Arab Americans around the country will join with friends and family to serve those outside of the Arab-American community.

The event is organized and supervised by the National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC).

Taleb Salhab, NNAAC director, told America.gov that the main goal of the group is to empower the Arab-American voice through cooperation and teamwork with other service organizations at the state level and nationally, as well as to encourage and promote Arab Americans for national and social service.

“This is the fifth year continuously to hold the annual National Arab American Service Day and simultaneously all over the U.S.,” Salhab said. “There are about 3,000 volunteers willing to serve society and build bridges with other communities and to present a positive image of the Arab-American community.”

The NNAAC is a project of the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS).

ACCESS is a national network of independent Arab-American, community-based social service organizations. The network’s primary mission is the development of grassroots institutions that can meet the needs of and represent the concerns of Arab Americans at the local level and collectively raise such concerns on the national stage.

Salhab also described National Arab-American Advocacy Week and talked about its objectives. On April 22–24, some 15 representatives from ACCESS and NNAAC met in Washington for the first National Arab American Advocacy Week, which the groups plan to hold annually. They met with members of Congress and White House staff, as well as with a State Department official.

They discussed topics such as immigration reform, racial profiling and the importance of national service programs. NNAAC members were briefed on relevant topics, given updates on current legislation, and offered advice on how to advocate for these issues. They also discussed community issues and promoted the National Arab American Service Day.

“This was a historic event for NNAAC and ACCESS,” Salhab said. “Never before have NNAAC members from across the country come to Washington, D.C., to collaborate with our national partners, including the Arab-American Institute, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and advocate on behalf of the issues facing Arab Americans on a daily basis. We look forward to building on its success.” In addition, the trip helped to establish a

stronger presence in Washington for Arab-American organizations, setting an important precedent for future visits by other members of the community.

Community service is at the fore of the American agenda.

In his efforts to promote voluntary service, President Obama signed a \$5.7 billion national service bill that will triple the size of the AmeriCorps program over the next eight years. He also signed into law a sweeping expansion of national service that will engage millions of Americans in addressing local needs through volunteer service.

President Obama, in remarks at the signing of that bill, said, “That’s the beauty of service. Anybody can do it. You don’t need to be a community organizer, a senator, a Kennedy or even a president to bring changes to people’s lives.” (See “Remarks by Obama at Signing of Edward Kennedy Serve America Act (<http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/April/20090422171547xjsnommis0.6150019.html>).”)

“I wouldn’t be standing here today if not for the service of others or for the purpose that service gave my own life,” Obama said. “I wasn’t just helping people; I was receiving something in return. Through service, I found a community that embraced me, citizenship that was meaningful, the direction that I had been seeking.”

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

USNS Comfort Band Spans Languages and Cultures

By Sharon Carper
Staff Writer

Washington — U.S. Navy hospital ship Comfort is on a four-month cruise through the Caribbean and Latin America on a humanitarian mission in support of "Continuing Promise 2009." Surgeons, nurses, dentists, physicians and even veterinarians on board — military and civilian alike — are bringing humanitarian assistance to people in five countries: Antigua and Barbuda, Colombia, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama. The citizens of Haiti and the Dominican Republic already received multiple health services (leg surgeries, eye surgeries, dental care, prescriptions filled and eye glasses supplied) as well as veterinary assistance during the April visit of the USNS Comfort.

Welcome too has been the U.S. Air Force Band South. The band members have performed at a variety of venues since the mission began in April. School groups, a women's prison, and worshippers at an Easter Sunday service were recipients of the talent of the Air Force band. Concerts and informal workshops met with enthusiastic responses.

"When we start playing music, it doesn't matter what we look like or what clothes or uniform we wear," said Air Force Captain Cristina Moore Urrutia, the band's commander and music director. "It's all about the music."

When Moore Urrutia heard about the opportunity to perform with a Haitian choir at St. Pierre's in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on Easter Sunday, she embraced the chance. "They wanted to find a community outreach and this turned out to be a great idea," she said. "I love making music with my colleagues and fellow musicians." The performance with the St. Pierre Chorale of Port-

band's mission at this concert was not only to perform, but to educate. During the performance, band members introduced each instrument and talked about the instrument's history and musical uniqueness. "The idea is that we leave as friends," said Moore Urrutia. "The way we do this is by sharing music with them. We have a lot in common and vice versa."



Haitian patients fill out medical history forms for the staff embarked aboard the U.S. Navy Military Sealift Command hospital ship USNS Comfort (T-AH 20) in Killick, Haiti, on April 10, 2009.

au-Prince was a blending of talent. The band played the classic "Amazing Grace" as the choir sang the lyrics in French. "For us to play and them to sing 'Amazing Grace' in English and French represented this mission," said Moore Urrutia. "We speak different languages, but we made it all come together as one with music."

Several days after the Easter concert, the band performed for St. Trinity Elementary and Music School in Port-au-Prince. The

The music program at the school has been in place for more than 50 years. The school's auditorium filled up with more than 200 students eager to learn something new from their "American neighbors," as one student described them.

The U.S. Embassy in Haiti arranged many events for the band during its

Haiti stop. "The band visiting the school is really important because music is a way people can interact without the usual language barrier," said Greg Aurit, an official in the U.S. Embassy in Haiti. "It is an opportunity to share culture, build an exchange and develop a mutual understanding. We are also building up good community relations for Comfort's mission."

At the USNS Comfort's stop in the Dominican Republic the band per-

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As H1N1 Flu Cases Increase Worldwide, Health Ministers to Meet

By Cheryl Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — International scientists and public health officials will come together over the next week to discuss pandemic influenza and vaccines. Among the discussion topics: whether to produce a vaccine for the new H1N1 virus and if so, how to make sure poorer countries have equitable access to it.

As the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that 34 countries officially have reported 7,520 cases of H1N1, the Intergovernmental Meeting on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness convened May 15 for a two-day meeting in Geneva.

"This is a time of great uncertainty and great pressure on governments, ministries of health and WHO," WHO Director-General Margaret Chan told meeting attendees. "I take it as my personal responsibility to keep the world informed, to adjust our recommendations as the situation evolves and to prepare for a multiplicity of future scenarios."

She added, "Many critical measures are under way, for enhanced preparedness and for mitigation of the health effects. As I have consistently stated, gaps in response, coping and mitigation capacities in different countries must be a top priority for WHO and the international community."

A second meeting, to be held in

Geneva May 18–22, is the 62nd session of the World Health Assembly, the world's highest health-policy-setting body and the forum through which health ministers from the 193 WHO member states govern the organization.



A baby wears a mask outside the hospital where H1N1 flu patients take medical treatment in Hong Kong.

The assembly will discuss pandemic flu preparedness; sharing of flu viruses and access to vaccines and other benefits; primary health care and strengthening health systems; social determinants of health; implementing the International Health Regulations; and monitoring the achievement of the health-related United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

The International Health Regulations, revised in 2005 and implemented by all WHO member nations in 2007, are global rules to enhance national, regional and global public health security. Their aim is to help the international community prevent or respond to acute public health

risks that have the potential to cross borders and threaten people worldwide. The eight United Nations development goals include reducing extreme poverty, reducing child mortality rates, fighting disease epidemics and developing a global partnership for development.

H1N1 VACCINE

One of the most important questions for health officials following H1N1 outbreaks involves the production of a vaccine for this new H1N1 virus strain. Vaccine manufacturers are already producing a vaccine for seasonal flu that is made up of killed or weakened forms of three different strains of circulating viruses: one influenza A H3N2 virus, one influenza A H1N1 virus that has a

different genetic composition than the new H1N1 virus, and one influenza B virus.

Vaccines are also under development for the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian flu that since 2003 has killed hundreds of millions of birds, sickened 423 people in 15 countries and killed 258.

"As soon as the [H1N1] virus was identified, work began on turning [it] into a candidate virus that could be provided to companies so they could test it out in their processes to see how well they might turn it into a vaccine," Dr. Keiji Fukuda, WHO assistant director-general for

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As H1N1 Flu Cases Increase Worldwide, Health Ministers to Meet . . .

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health security and environment, said in a May 14 briefing.

Scientists must determine the right H1N1 viral strains to go into a vaccine, he said, and companies would need several weeks to test the candidate vaccine. Experts must then decide whether to produce the vaccine. If they do, they must also decide whether to increase production capacity for the H1N1 vaccine by stopping production of the seasonal flu vaccine or stopping development of the H5N1 vaccine.

"What is really going to be wrestled with is that seasonal influenza itself has a significant impact on people. This is not a benign infection; this is an infection which is estimated to kill some hundreds of thousands of people a year around the world. So there's a real trade-off if you stop making that vaccine," Fukuda said.

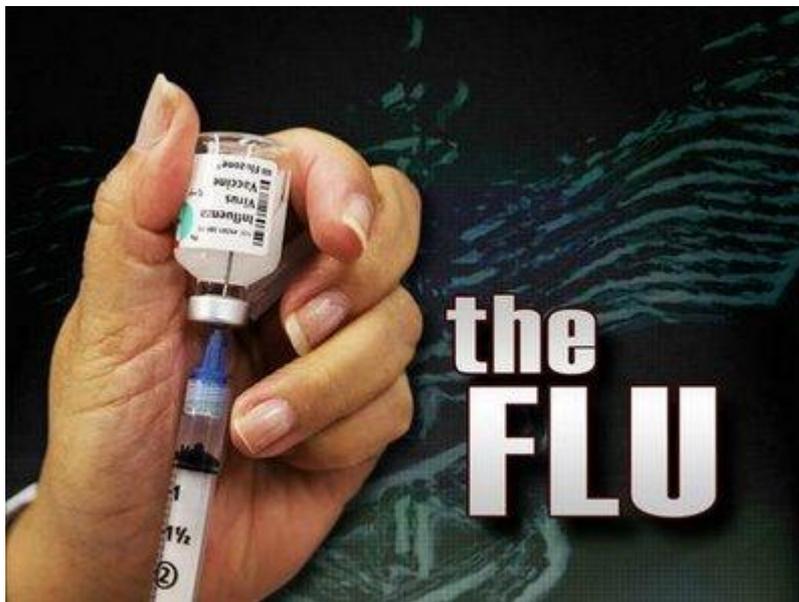
"These are the kinds of questions which will be discussed as we go through these meetings," he said. "It is not possible to say that there will be a decision made by [a certain] date. It really is going through this painstaking and difficult process."

AROUND THE WORLD

As of May 15, according to WHO, Mexico reported 2,446 laboratory-confirmed human cases of H1N1 infection with 60 deaths, the United States reported 4,298 confirmed

cases with three deaths, Canada reported 449 confirmed cases with one death and Costa Rica reported eight confirmed human cases with one death. Many countries, on many continents, have confirmed cases as of May 15 but have recorded no deaths.

"This is an event which is serious," Fukuda said. "This is something



which requires close monitoring, but most of the cases at this time continue to be mild cases where [most] people recover without needing hospitalization."

This estimation of severity could change, Chan said, because of the intrinsic ability of influenza viruses to mutate and other factors.

"First, scientists are concerned about possible changes that could take place as the virus spreads to the Southern Hemisphere and encounters currently circulating human viruses as the normal influenza season in this hemisphere begins," Chan said.

"Second ... the H5N1 avian influenza virus is endemic in poultry in some parts of the world," she said. "It is out there, entrenched. No one can predict how the H5N1 virus will behave under the pressure of a pandemic."

Influenza A viruses like H5N1 and the new H1N1 virus mutate easily.

If the new H1N1 virus begins to spread in countries where highly pathogenic H5N1 is already established, scientists fear that their genetic components could mix, creating a new virus that spreads easily from person to person, as does the new H1N1 virus, and that kills nearly 60 percent of the

people it infects, as does the H5N1 virus.

More information about the H1N1 situation is available at CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>), WHO (<http://www.who.int/csr/disease/swineflu/en/>) and America.gov (http://www.america.gov/h1n1_flu.html) Web sites.

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

Forecasts Show How Changing Environment Might Affect Life

By Cheryl Pellerin
Science Writer

Washington — Scientists are combining climate-related data sets, data from Earth-observing satellites and mathematical models of organism behavior to forecast the effects of environmental change on ecosystems, much like how meteorologists forecast weather and climate.

Ecological forecasts — critical new tools in development for resource managers on a planet whose climate is warming — predict the effects of biological, chemical and physical changes in the environment on ecosystems that support the existence of life on Earth.

Ecology is the study of the relationship between organisms and their environments. As a practice, ecological forecasting has been around since the first farmer stood in a field, squinted up at the sky and estimated the effects of a shortened rainy season on his fig trees. Today, the emerging ecological forecasting discipline is a data-driven scientific synthesis of physics, geology, chemistry, biology and psychology.

NASA Ames Research Center in California's Silicon Valley is working to make ecological forecasting tools more widely available through its Terrestrial Observation and Prediction System (TOPS).

TOPS is a data and modeling software system that integrates data from satellite, aircraft and ground sensors with weather, climate and application models to produce

"nowcasts" — short-term (zero- to three-hour) forecasts — and forecasts of ecological conditions.

"Weather forecasting made dramatic gains in the 1960s and 1970s, climate forecasting — climate is averaged or long-term



weather — really started coming into its own in the 1980s and 1990s," Woody Turner, program scientist for biological diversity and program manager for ecological forecasting at NASA's Science Mission Directorate, told *America.gov*. "Now I believe it's a logical step to bring living systems into that forecasting paradigm."

"Imagine if it were possible," Rama-krishna Nemani, a research scientist at NASA Ames, wrote along with co-authors in a recent paper about TOPS, "to accurately predict short-falls or bumper crops, epidemics of vector-borne diseases such as ma-

laria and West Nile virus, or wildfire danger as much as three to six months in advance."

ON THE GROUND

Ecological forecasts can be short term, a few hours to a few days;

midterm or seasonal, for example, estimating the start of a growing season; and long term, on decade to century scales.

For officials at Yosemite National Park in east central California, NASA Ames Earth scientists created a forecast of potential changes in the region over the next 50 years. The park covers 3,081 square kilometers and reaches across the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountain chain.

According to the forecast, Nemani told *America.gov*, "the snowpack is

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Forecasts Show How Changing Environment Might Affect Life . . .

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going to decrease by almost 50 percent and the growing season is going to start almost three weeks earlier than it does now. In response, plants are going to run out of water in the middle of the summer. That would increase the fire frequency and Yosemite already has a lot of fires. That would change the composition of the plants."

"Remember those are model predictions," Edwin Sheffner, deputy chief of Earth science at NASA Ames, told America.gov. "There's no certainty that's going to happen, but those are our model predictions. A challenge of our ongoing research is trying to validate the models to narrow the error bounds around those model estimates."

In another application of ecological forecasting, the NASA Office of Earth Science has worked with the U.S. Geological Survey to develop the Invasive Species Forecasting System, which brings together ecologists, computer scientists, statisticians, remote-sensing-technology scientists, natural resource managers, policymakers and others with an interest in the range of nonindigenous species — plants or animals — that harm the habitats they invade.

The completed system will be able to create regional assessments of invasive species patterns and vulnerable habitats and generate maps of hot spots for potential exotic species invasions.

BIOLOGICAL CROSSROADS

At the junction of North and South America, Central America is a biological crossroads with 7 percent to

8 percent of the planet's biodiversity in less than half of 1 percent of its land mass. Off its shores lies the second-largest system of coral reefs on Earth.

In 1997, the leaders of its seven nations (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) announced a multinational effort to integrate their conservation efforts across international boundaries. The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor is a series of national parks, other protected areas and lands subject to special management regimes extending from southern Mexico to the Colombian border.

As part of this effort, NASA partnered with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the World Bank and the Central American Commission for Environment and Development to help develop a regional visualization and monitoring system called SERVIR. SERVIR combines imagery from five NASA satellites with environmental and socioeconomic data through a computer-based geographic information system. It will operate a series of nodes located in the United States and in each Central American country.

Through the system, Central American managers can use satellite imagery to detect wildfires and major changes in land cover, track rainfall and weather patterns and monitor coastal margins and coral reefs. Models will help users appreciate the poorly understood connection between changes in land cover and climate variation.

More information about the Ames Research Center's Ecological Forecasting Laboratory ([\[ecocast.arc.nasa.gov/\]\(http://ecocast.arc.nasa.gov/\) \) is available at the NASA Web site.](http://</p></div><div data-bbox=)

More information about ecological forecasting (<http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/topics/coasts/ecoforecasting/>) at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is available at the NOAA Web site. ♦

Obama, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu . . .

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January, named former U.S. Senator George Mitchell as the U.S. special envoy for Middle East peace.

Netanyahu met May 11 in private meetings with the Egyptian president at Sharm el-Sheik, Egypt, where Mubarak encouraged Netanyahu to make progress on the peace talks, including Palestinian statehood. And on May 14 Netanyahu met with Jordanian King Abdullah II, who also urged him to commit to a two-state solution with the Palestinians as the only way to achieve a lasting Middle East peace. King Abdullah was in Washington April 21 in a prelude to these scheduled meetings and urged Obama to push for Palestinian statehood.

What foreign affairs decisions should President Obama consider? Comment on America.gov's blog (<http://blogs.america.gov/campaign/2009/01/21/day-2-what-should-obama%e2%80%99s-top-priorities-be/>). ♦

President Obama Seeks New Fuel Efficiency Standards

By Michelle Austein Brooks
Staff Writer

Washington — New federal rules proposed May 19 would increase national fuel efficiency standards for vehicles sold in the United States. “We have set in motion a national policy aimed at both increasing gas mileage and decreasing greenhouse gas pollution for all new trucks and cars sold in the United States of America,” President Obama said at the White House.

“The goal is to set one national standard that will rapidly increase fuel efficiency, without compromising safety, by an average of 5 percent each year between 2012 and 2016,” Obama said.

The new rules would require vehicles’ average fuel economy standards to be 35.5 miles per gallon (15.09 kilometers per liter) in 2016 — 39 miles per gallon on average for cars (16.58 kilometers per liter) and 30 miles per gallon (12.75 kilometers per liter) on average for trucks. In 2009 vehicle models, the average fuel efficiency is 25 miles per gallon (10.63 kilometers per liter.)

Over the five years (car model year 2012 through car model year 2016) that these rules would govern, approximately 1.8 billion barrels of oil would be saved, and greenhouse gas emissions would be reduced by 900 million metric tons, according to the White House.

President Obama’s proposal, which like other federal regulations will have to be formally drafted, proposed, reviewed and open to the public for comment, would provide a joint set of standards issued by

the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). In formulating these regulations, the Obama administration worked with federal agencies and representatives of the automotive industry. Ten car companies and the UAW (The International Union, United Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers of America) are supporting these rules, and representatives from many of these organizations joined President Obama at the White House for the announcement.

The administration also worked closely with state governors, including Arnold Schwarzenegger of California. California has already sought permission from the EPA to set its own emission standards for vehicles sold in the state, and 13 states and the District of Columbia have said they would follow California’s standards. While the EPA is expected to rule on California’s request in the next few weeks, the state’s government has indicated that it is willing to support the new federal standards.

Consumers’ choices should not be limited by the new rules, according to the White House. Each class or size of vehicle will have its own standards so that Americans can continue to purchase any vehicle size.

While the new regulations would initially mean added costs for both

car manufacturers and Americans purchasing vehicles, in the long term both would save money, Obama said. With clear guidelines in place, car companies can better plan for future production, he said. Americans may have to pay more for a fuel-efficient vehicle, but would ultimately save more money on gas. The typical driver would save about \$2,800 by getting bet-



President Obama aimed at both increasing fuel economy and reducing greenhouse gas pollution for all new cars and trucks sold in the United States.

ter gas mileage, the president said.

“The fact is everyone wins: Consumers pay less for fuel,” Obama said, and car companies “have new incentives to create the technologies and the jobs that will provide smarter ways to power our vehicles.”

More information about the president’s proposal (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/A-Culture-Change-on-Climate-Change/>) is available on the White House Web site.

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

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Telling America's story

USNS Comfort Band Spans Languages and . . .

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formed at the Najayo Women's Prison. The band performed songs for the inmates in a two-hour performance. "It was a great opportunity to play for an audience," said Air Force Senior Airman David Evans, a trumpeter with the band. "It felt really good to bring some happiness to a community that might not have all of the opportunities that we have." According to the prison's director, Patricia Lagombra, for the Air Force to play at the prison was "something beautiful, because you're letting them know that they are still people and that there are others who do care for them. You're really giving them a unique opportunity."

The band's continuing performances, as the USNS Comfort completes its cruise, will build an exchange between people and develop not only mutual understanding but also good community relations for the Comfort's mission. Band director Moore Urrutia told America.gov that the highlight of the experience so far has been seeing how much in common band members have with others. "It's about partnering and working together and creating relationships through music. That's common to all cultures."

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

United States Aiding Victims of Gender-Based Violence in Africa . . .

(Continued from page 4)

has funded a special program for the prevention of gender-based violence and response measures for refugees. The program has provided more than \$27.8 million for projects in cooperation with non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

In 2008, the department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration provided more than \$6 million for programs seeking to draw attention to and prevent gender-based violence. The bureau also supported \$3.2 million of gender-based violence initiatives in a health program for Burmese refugees in Thailand and a radio program for refugees fleeing violence in Darfur, according to Verveer.

The State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor gave more than \$2 million for 10 women's centers in Darfur that helped victims of gender-based violence receive psychosocial counseling and referrals for medical services, Verveer added.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also allocates resources for helping women victims of violence in Africa. In December 2008, the agency signed a \$5 million three-year cooperative agreement with the international NGO Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI) to work with women victims of violence in the DRC.

John Prendergast, co-founder of the Enough Project, an initiative to end genocide and crimes against

humanity, told the Senate hearing that "in my 25 years of working on African conflict resolution, Congo [DRC] is by far the most complex war I have witnessed."

Prendergast, an Africa adviser in President Bill Clinton's administration, said one of the biggest drivers of the conflict is competition for the country's rich mineral base, much of it located in the eastern provinces.

"Let's be absolutely clear," he told the Senate panels, "measures to deal with rape as a weapon of war in isolation will fail and fail miserably ... [unless we] move from managing conflict symptoms to ending the conflicts themselves." ♦