



Weekly Special Report



Produced by the Public Affairs Section

INSIDE

U.S. and Ethiopian Experts Share Best Practices to Improve Water Resource Management



An Ethiopian scientist receives his course certificate from Minister of Water Resources Asfaw Dingamo, U.S. Embassy Deputy Chief of Mission Deborah Malac, and USAID's Kevin Smith.

ETHIOPIA - For the last two weeks a team of American water resource experts have taught 15 engineers, hydrogeologists and hydrologists from various Ethiopian government agencies a course on advanced hydrologic modeling. This course, the first of three, will help prepare the participants to be Ethiopia's water key experts and is part of a larger U.S-Ethiopian partnership to assess the country's water resources for future development.

The United States and Ethiopian Governments recently agreed to lay the groundwork for a watershed management study of the Ogaden

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Obama Proposes Massive Global Health Initiative

*By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer*

Washington — The United States is launching a six-year global health initiative that will help some of the poorest regions of the world fight health challenges that kill people who could otherwise be saved with improved health care, says President Obama.

"That is why I am asking Congress to approve my fiscal year

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U.S. President Barack Obama.

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U.S. and Ethiopian Experts Share Best Practices to Improve . . .

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region in southern Ethiopia. In January 2009, the two governments signed a Letter of Implementation for the "Groundwater Exploration, Assessment and Mapping" of the watersheds within the Ogaden. The study will run through 2012 and is a cooperative effort by U.S. Military's Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Ethiopian Ministry of Water Resources, Geological Survey of Ethiopia and the Ministry of Mines and Energy.

CJTF-HOA scientists are partnering with Ethiopian scientists to gain a better understanding of groundwater potential for the greater Ogaden basin through the use of hydrological modeling and remote sensing. This is being accomplished through advanced workshops put on by the Naval Facilities Engineering Service Center, U.S. Army Corp of Engineers and the U.S. Geological Survey.

This multi-year project will provide the Ethiopian Ministries with data and tools to characterize the aquifers within the Ogaden. Surface water modeling will be used to understand the physical setting and movement of water during the rainy and dry seasons. Groundwater modeling will provide an elementary



Scientists participating in the advanced hydrologic modeling course pose for a group photo with the Minister of Water Resources, U.S. Mission officials and visiting American water experts.

view of how water moves in the subsurface once it infiltrates the soil. Satellite remote sensed data will provide the team with valuable information to support the modeling efforts. The collaborative study will provide critical baseline data and information which can be used to generate an effective watershed management plan and also develop feasible best management practices to ensure safe drinking water for the future.

CJTF-HOA has been performing hydrological surveys in various

parts of Ethiopia since late 2006, and has done similar surveys in Djibouti and Kenya. CJTF-HOA's capacity building projects contribute to U.S. Government efforts to promote a better tomorrow for Ethiopian citizens by supporting clean water, functional schools, better roadways and improved medical facilities. ♦

Obama Proposes Massive Global Health Initiative. . .

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2010 budget request of \$8.6 billion — and \$63 billion over six years — to shape a new, comprehensive global health strategy,” Obama said.

“We cannot wall ourselves off from the world and hope for the best, nor ignore the public health challenges beyond our borders.”

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the initiative will become a crucial component of American foreign policy. Investments in global programs to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and other preventable diseases will save lives and reduce maternal and child deaths, she said.

Deputy Secretary of State Jack Lew told reporters at a White House briefing May 5 that the global health initiative goes beyond current programs designed to fight HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis and will begin addressing the health needs of women, children and families in developing nations. It is also designed to curb the impact of neglected tropical diseases.

“Neglected tropical diseases are a symptom of poverty and disadvantage,” according to the World Health Organization. “Those most affected are the poorest populations often living in remote, rural areas, urban slums or in conflict zones.”

Although medically diverse, neglected tropical diseases share features that allow them to persist in conditions of poverty, where they cluster and frequently overlap. More than 1 billion people — one-sixth of the world's population — suffer

from one or more neglected tropical diseases, the WHO says.

“Research shows that a handful of neglected diseases could be eliminated with relatively modest resources and a sustained commitment,” Lew said. “Basic obstetric care can exponentially reduce the number of mothers and children who die in childbirth.”

Lew said basic health interventions for things like diarrheal diseases can sharply decrease the mortality of children under 5.

“We have the opportunity to cost-effectively contribute to political stability in a way that enhances our national security, while advancing our core humanitarian values,” he said.

The initiative is included in the fiscal year 2010 federal budget, which was presented to Congress May 7. The 2010 fiscal year begins October 1. The budget proposal was delayed by the Obama administration to permit more time to evaluate federal programs and make adjustments.

Lew said the health initiative does not include a listing of specific regions and targeted countries, but, he said, a lot of countries in Africa could use more help.

In the first year of the initiative, Lew said, the \$8.645 billion includes \$7.4 billion in funding for the Bush administration's effective President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and President's Malaria Initiative. Another \$1.3 billion is for other global health priorities. Last year the United States provided \$8.16 billion for

global health issues; the increase this year is \$459 million, he said.

Lew said this initiative builds, in part, on President Bush's PEPFAR program, which provides lifesaving treatment for more than 2 million people, up from 50,000 people six years ago.

“Dramatic gains have also been achieved under the President's Malaria Initiative, which in its third year alone has already reached more than 32 million people in 15 African countries,” Lew said.

Transcripts of President Obama's remarks (<http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/May/20090505165154eaifas0.283897.html>) and Secretary Clinton's remarks (<http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2009/May/20090505174936eaifas0.7123529.html>) on the global health initiative are available on America.gov.

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/>).

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

New Research Reveals Droughts Common in West Africa

By Daniel Gorelick
Staff Writer

Washington — The decades-long drought that began in West Africa in the 1960s is not an anomaly compared with what the region has faced during the last three millennia.

An analysis of sediment from a crater lake in Ghana shows periods of severe drought lasting from decades to centuries throughout the last 3,000 years, according to a study published in the April 17 issue of *Science* magazine.

“What’s disconcerting about this record is that it suggests that the most recent drought was relatively minor in the context of the West African drought history,” geologist Timothy M. Shanahan, lead author of the study, said in an April press release.

The most recent lasted more than three centuries, between 1400 and 1700. “If we were to switch into one of these century-scale patterns of drought, it would be a lot more severe and it would be very difficult for people to adjust to the change,” Shanahan said.

Sediment analysis showed that West African droughts occurred during relatively warm and cool periods of the Earth’s history. The recent megadrought coincided with the Little Ice Age of 1400 to 1850, when temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere were lower than they are now.

Scientists cannot yet predict how climate change will affect the fre-

quency or duration of future droughts, geologist Jonathan Overpeck told *America.gov*. “We can be confident that droughts will continue to occur, and that decades-long droughts should be a very real concern.”

of future droughts, this is not enough to reduce human suffering and economic hardship, according to Overpeck.

“Our work makes it clear that we must also work to make the people of sub-Saharan Africa more resilient to drought and its impacts.”

Overpeck points to the dry, southwestern United States as a model for how scientists can work with local groups to design and implement a plan for dealing with drought.

These scientists work with local water, forest, wildfire and park and recreation managers, as well as farmers and ranchers, to learn what climate studies would be most useful for the region and to make existing climate

knowledge more useful. The group, called Climate Assessment for the Southwest (CLIMAS), sees engaging with locals as crucial because they can help create policy as well as or better than the scientists, Overpeck said.

When the current drought in the southwestern United States began in 1999, CLIMAS “played a big role in designing and implementing a drought plan for the state of Arizona,” Overpeck, who is a member of CLIMAS, said.

He thinks that “in Africa, it would be ideal to do the same thing.” Scientists need to build trust and part-

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Tropical trees submerged in 15 to 20 meters of water provide a record of past droughts. (Courtesy J.T. Overpeck and W. Wheeler)

As global temperatures rise, droughts will occur under hotter conditions, more severely affecting natural vegetation, agriculture and water supplies, according to Overpeck, a co-author of the study.

“Some studies suggest more drought, some less,” Overpeck said. “It would be against great odds to bet that the region will become free of drought.”

RESPONDING TO FUTURE DROUGHT

Although making immediate changes to reduce global warming likely will help mitigate the effects

Anti-Piracy Efforts Along Africa Coast Show Some Success

By Charles W. Corey
Staff Writer

Washington — Efforts to blunt maritime piracy off the coast of Somalia in the Gulf of Aden are beginning to show some success, but there is an international consensus that more must be done, says Ambassador Stephen Mull.

In testimony April 30 before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Mull, the acting assistant secretary of state for political-military affairs, told lawmakers the United States is seeking emergency consultations with its Contact Group partners and is finding “notable receptivity” to its outreach effort. The Contact Group on Piracy off the

Coast of Somalia was created January 14 to improve discussion and coordination among states and organizations aimed at suppressing piracy at sea.

The United States will intensify its efforts to persuade victim states to prosecute pirates, Mull said.

“We are working both internally and with other countries to develop the ability to deny pirates the benefits of concessions, including the tracking and freezing of their ill-gotten gains,” he told the lawmakers, who called him to Capitol Hill for an explanation of U.S. policies on the piracy problem.

“We are working to expand the regional capacity to prosecute and

incarcerate pirates, both by helping to fund multilateral programs to build judicial capacity and by direct unilateral assistance to countries who have expressed a willingness to adapt their laws and processes to accommodate prosecution and detention,” Mull said.



Military ships escort a variety of vessels in the Gulf of Aden to deter maritime piracy.

Mull said the United States “will continue to press the importance of a no-concessions policy when dealing with pirates.” Additionally, he said, the United States is working “in political-military channels to ensure that military counterpiracy operations are as robust and well-coordinated as possible, and ... intensifying our efforts to support Somali assistance processes. We are also exploring strategies to actively seek the release of captive ships and hostages, some of whom have been held for months.”

Mull said those actions are now producing some success. “Naval patrol interventions are increasingly active, international naval forces have intervened to stop dozens of

attempted piratical attacks in the past nine months, and we’re seeing a significant upswing in the number of countries willing to commit assets to the effort.”

He acknowledged, however, that the United States faces “political and legal obstacles to a shared understanding of the imperative for prosecution in and by victim states, and significant logistical issues in prosecution by countries who actually have the will to prosecute pirates. Regional states face challenges with regard to detention and prosecution.”

Tracking and freezing pirate ransoms is even harder than tracking terrorist finances, given that

pirates are most often paid off in the form of air-dropped bags of cash, he said. Mull also said that “the shipping industry — as well as some of our partners — has vigorous objections to, and few incentives for, arming their ships and crews.” Progress still must be made in that area, he said.

Mull identified fighting piracy as an important element in the United States’ strategic objectives in Somalia, which focus on helping Somalia regain political and economic stability, eliminating the threat of terrorism and responding to the humanitarian needs of the Somali people.

Mull said the United States hopes

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Reducing Nuclear Arsenals Is a Critical U.S.-Russian Concern

*By Merle David Kellerhals Jr.
Staff Writer*

Washington — Reducing nuclear arsenals is among the highest priorities for the United States and Russia, but an array of other international issues from the Middle East to North Korea also fills the crowded agenda of the two nations.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met for talks May 7 before heading to the White House for consultations with President Obama in a week in Washington that has been filled with high-stakes foreign affairs issues. The president and secretary have held critical trilateral consultations with the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan in an effort to quell a rising Taliban insurgency in both countries. It is an issue that also includes Russia, which has opened a northern supply corridor for the NATO-led security force in Afghanistan.

Clinton said she and Lavrov exchanged views on a range of issues, including Afghanistan, North Korea, the Middle East, Iran, Georgia and the NATO-Russia Council. "We are very focused on ... making sure that the United States and Russia have a very vigorous, ongoing dialogue among our two governments," she said during a joint press briefing in the ornate Benjamin Franklin Room at the State Department.

"We have attached great impor-

tance in our negotiations to strategic stability, including the preparation of a new arrangement that will replace START-1, which will expire in early December," Lavrov said through an interpreter. He said a date for the July summit will be



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (R) arrives for a joint press conference with Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov at the State Department in Washington, DC. (AFP/Karen Bleier)

announced soon, and will include details of the summit agenda.

Both President Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev committed to a new nuclear arms reduction treaty to replace START-1. They said during talks in London on April 1 at the G20 Financial Summit that they wanted to see a first draft of the treaty by the time they meet again at the Moscow Summit in early July before the Group of Eight (G8) Summit in Italy.

The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START-1, expires December 5. Its replacement is seen as a first step toward a nuclear-free agenda proposed by Obama and Medvedev. The United States and Russia own 95 percent of the strategic nuclear warheads in the

world.

"The foreign minister and I discussed how we can, through our own efforts together, set a standard and an example to improve the security of nuclear facilities and prevent the proliferation of nuclear material around the world," Clinton said.

Clinton also said the overall bilateral agenda is expanding and includes the global economic crisis, climate change and the Arctic.

"These are areas where we think it is in our interest to cooperate and it is in the interest of the world that the

United States and Russia do so," Clinton said.

STABILITY IN GEORGIA

Clinton said she and Lavrov discussed equal concerns about Georgia and its two breakaway regions South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia and Georgia fought a brief war over the regions in August 2008.

"We have [had] the opportunity to discuss the conditions on the ground there and the need for stability," Clinton said. "And I believe that Minister Lavrov, as well as the Russian government, recognizes that stability and a peaceful resolution to the tensions in Georgia is in everyone's interest."

Clinton added that a disagreement

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United States Wins Seat on U.N. Human Rights Council

By Jane Morse
Staff Writer

Washington — The United States has won a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Council and is eager to begin working both to improve the council itself and to advance the protection of human rights worldwide, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said May 12.

Speaking with reporters at the U.N. General Assembly in New York City, Rice said, "While we recognize that the Human Rights Council has been a flawed body that has not lived up to its potential, we are looking forward to working from within with a broad cross section of member states to strengthen and reform the Human Rights Council and enable it to live up to the vision that was crafted when it was created."

Rice said that during its three-year term on the council, the United States intends "to lead based on the strong, principled vision that the American people have about respecting human rights (and) supporting democracy."

The United States received 90 percent of the valid votes cast, Rice said. "We're gratified by the strong showing of encouragement for the United States to again play a meaningful leadership role in multilateral organizations, including the U.N., on the very vitally important set of issues relating to human rights and democracy," she said.

The United States was one of 18 countries elected or re-elected to three-year terms on the 47-seat, Geneva-based council. The other



recently elected countries are Bangladesh, Belgium, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Djibouti, Hungary, Jordan, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritius, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Senegal and Uruguay. Noting that some countries on the council have been criticized for suppressing human rights within their own borders, Rice said, "Obviously there will always be some countries whose respect and record on human rights is sub-par; we have not been perfect ourselves."

The United States "ran for the Human Rights Council because this administration and indeed, the American people, are deeply committed to upholding and respecting the human rights of every individual."

"We wouldn't be running," she said, "if we thought it was impossible for the council to fulfill the vision that we all had when it was established."

In 2011, the council, the major U.N. body working to promote and protect human rights, will undergo a review of its procedures, an event Rice described as "an important opportunity to strengthen and re-

form the council."

Seats on the council are distributed among the United Nations' regional groups: 13 seats for Africa; 13 for Asia; eight for Latin America and the Caribbean; six for Eastern Europe; and seven for Western Europe and other states (including those from North America.)

In the past, there has been criticism, including from the United States, about how the council deals with Israel. Between 2006 and 2008, for example, Israel was condemned 15 times.

The Obama administration, however, has been eager to work more closely with U.N. institutions to effect change. When Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Rice announced March 31 that the United States would seek a seat on the council, they emphasized that the decision was in keeping with the Obama administration's "new era of engagement" with other nations to advance American security interests and to meet the global challenges of the 21st century.

See also "Obama Administration Seeks Greater Involvement with U.N. (<http://www.america.gov/st/democracyhr-english/2009/April/20090414111055ajesrom0.7777979.html>)"

For more information, see "On Fundamental Human Rights, Our Pledge (<http://www.state.gov/p/io/rls/rm/2009/123157.htm>)" on the State Department Web site.

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

Program Helps High School Dropouts Re-start Their Educations

By Jeffrey Thomas
Staff Writer

Washington — Kids drop out of high school for a variety of reasons: Some are teen parents and have jobs and family responsibilities, while others suffer from drug and alcohol addiction, homelessness or abuse. Some are just starting to learn English. Some are not interested in what high school has to offer or see it as irrelevant to their lives.

No matter the reason, returning to high school is not easy. Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon, puts these high school dropouts into a college program that provides a challenging academic environment and offers much support. Students can earn their high school diploma as well as earn credits for a college degree.

The program, Gateway to College, has been so successful that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided funding beginning in 2003 to replicate it around the United States. Other foundations now also provide support. The national network today includes 17 colleges nationwide with another seven in training and set to begin serving students in the fall of 2009.

Gateway to College is a scholarship program for at-risk youth, 16 to 20 years old, who have dropped out of school or are on the verge of dropping out. School districts in partnership with community colleges also provide funding.

"In a given community there needs to be a range of legitimate options for young people that fits their needs rather than their having to fit

themselves to an institution," says Nick Mathern, Gateway's director of new program development. "We need to have legitimate and high-stakes, challenging alternatives for students who haven't previously experienced academic success."



Gateway to College plans to expand to 50 partner programs within the next five years to seven years.

Gateway to College tries to engage students who are disengaged, taking them at whatever point they left off with their educations, Mathern said.

It's not just a question of providing courses that fill the gaps in a student's transcript, although that is part of it. Some students need free bus passes or they won't be able to reach the campus. Others need child care for their family. Some need meals because they don't have money for food.

One key to the Gateway approach is the required "foundation term," when students, in addition to taking

reading, writing and math, also take a college survival-and-success class in which they learn how to take notes effectively, study for tests and juggle school, work and family life.

"We start our students all together for one semester so they can develop a sense of community and understand that other people are in this with them. And then after that ... we're going to help them integrate into the general college," Mathern said. "So ours does not feel like a high school; it feels like a program that is located within a college, and students will come back to our offices to receive some of our services, but their education happens just on the college campus."

Of those who succeeded in getting their high school diploma as of 2008, the average student had

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Arab-American Writer Cites U.S. Freedom of Expression

**By Ahmed Mohamed
Staff Writer**

Washington— Arab-American writers long have immigrated to the United States seeking freedom of expression in their writings and relief from censorship, says Arab novelist and sociologist Halim Barakat.

Barakat made that point April 13 in a Library of Congress lecture, "Exploration into Exile and Creativity: the Case of Arab-American Writers."

The author spoke to an audience of mostly Arab-American writers, and elaborated on two of his well-known books: the novel *The Crane* and the nonfiction work *The Arab World: Society, Culture and State*, both of which have been translated into English and published in the United States.

Barakat was born in 1933 into a Greek-Orthodox Arab family in Kafroun, Syria, and raised in Beirut, Lebanon. He attended the American University of Beirut, receiving a bachelor of arts degree in 1955 and his master's degree in sociology in 1960. He immigrated to the United States in the early 1960s and received a doctoral degree in social psychology in 1966 from the University of Michigan.

He explored his experiences living in exile and his ability to express his personal freedom and his rebellion

against tradition through literature. He explained that Arab-American writers' creativity and writing style have been affected by life in the United States.

Barakat offered examples of authors, such as Gibran Khalil Gibran and Edward Said, who have contributed greatly to both Arabic and American literature.



Halim Barakat

Barakat was asked why Arab writers choose to come to the United States.

"Because they heard about the democracy and freedom of expression that writers of all backgrounds and ethnicity practice in the USA," he said. He added that they heard this information from their fellow Arab writers who immigrated earlier and established the New York Pen League (Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyah), known more familiarly as Al-Mahjar.

This became an Arab-American literary movement of the 1920s and 1930s that included such important authors as Elia Abu Madi and Gibran, who became the best known of the "Mahjar poets" or immigrant Arabic writers. Gibran was called a reformer and received widespread recognition in the Arabic world for his books and poems, especially *Spirits Rebellious* (1908) and *Broken Wings* (1912).

Barakat said he believes the cause for immigration of some Arab Americans to the United States is "the repressive social institutions,

political or religious" in the Arab world. But he also argued that their novels were becoming more popular partly because so many Arab writers had been displaced or exiled from their native homes — thereby not only enmeshing them in disjointed, complicated, multiple identities, but also allowing them to "see things more objectively from a distance."

He concluded with words from a poem by Gibran: "and hence an exile am I and an exile I shall remain until death lifts me up and bears me even unto my country."

The Library of Congress lecture was part of a series on topics related to Arab societies. The library's Near East Section, part of the African and Middle Eastern Division, has hosted a series of similar events.

More information on upcoming and past events at the Library of Congress' African and Middle Eastern Division (<http://www.loc.gov/rr/amed/Upcomingevents/UpcomingEvents.html>) is available on the Library of Congress Web site.

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

Graphic Novels: An Evolving Art Form Tackles New Themes

By Lauren Monsen
Staff Writer

Washington - In recent years, Asian-American artists and writers have attained considerable prominence as creators of sophisticated comic books and graphic novels, lending an adult sensibility to a medium that once appealed mostly to a juvenile audience.

The term "graphic novel" refers to a storytelling format that combines cartoon-style drawings and dialogue, but addresses more mature themes than the traditional comic book. Now, Asian-American artists are lending their perspective to the genre. Through the graphic novel, authors such as Adrian Tomine (a fourth-generation Japanese American), Gene Luen Yang (a Chinese American) and Derek Kirk Kim (a Korean American who immigrated to the United States at age 8) are exploring questions about identity, cultural roots and social issues that relate to growing up as members of a racial minority in a predominantly white society.

Tomine, creator of the comic-book series *Optic Nerve*, became known as a prodigy of sorts by independently publishing his own material while still a teenager. Now in his mid-30s, Tomine is the author of *Shortcomings* (2007), a work praised by *Publishers Weekly* as "an irresistible gem of a graphic novel." Revolving around the character of Ben Tanaka, a 30-year-old Japanese American, the book raises questions about cultural assimilation, the psychological nuances of interracial dating and the occasionally mortifying process of self-discovery.

In an interview with *America.gov*,

Tomine explained that *Shortcomings* is sometimes misconstrued as autobiographical because its protagonist is Japanese American. "Shortcomings was the result of years of making mental notes and collecting observations, although it is entirely a work of fiction," said Tomine.

"When I first started working as a cartoonist, I was a bit taken aback by how often I was asked about why I wasn't addressing my ethnic heritage in my work. The expectation that anyone from a minority group should make that experience the sole focus of their creative endeavors was somewhat off-putting to me," he recalled. "But as time passed, I started to envision a way in which I might be able to address those issues and remain consistent with my other work." Tomine said he deliberately avoided making generalizations about Asian Americans - or anyone else: "It was important to me to avoid any kind of didacticism or grandstanding."

The opening pages of *Shortcomings* reveal that Ben and his girlfriend, Miko, are living together in Berkeley, California. Miko suspects Ben is attracted to white women (which he is, though he denies it). Neglected and unhappy, Miko leaves for New York, ostensibly to accept an internship. Ben does not realize that she is, in effect, breaking up with him; he assumes the relationship is simply on hiatus, and he views Miko's absence as an opportunity to date white women without Miko finding out. Some time later, Ben visits New York at a friend's urging. He tracks down Miko, and is shocked to learn that he has been displaced by Miko's new biracial boyfriend.

Tomine's understated black-and-white drawings and pitch-perfect dialogue illuminate his protagonist's reflexive hypocrisy: Ben feels entitled to pursue interracial relationships, yet objects to Miko doing so. Unfolding as a series of vignettes, *Shortcomings* captures the frequently chaotic pace of modern life, while hinting that Ben might be on the first step to maturity. "The story's conclusion is open to interpretation, perhaps to a frustrating degree," said Tomine. Ben's fate will remain ambiguous, since Tomine has no plans to revisit him in a future book.

"I think the very fact that it would be easy and kind of fun for me to continue writing about Ben Tanaka is the perfect reason why I shouldn't," added Tomine. "Even though I don't think *Shortcomings* is a perfect book, I'm pretty sure that if I continued the storyline, it would only diminish what I've already done." His next project will be a collection of linked short stories, with full-color illustrations.

Like Tomine, Yang (author of *American Born Chinese*, 2006) and Kim (author of *Same Difference and Other Stories*, 2004) have achieved cult status within the comics industry - as well as a broader reputation as serious literary talents. *American Born Chinese*, which won the Michael L. Printz Award and was named a National Book Award finalist, interweaves a Chinese fable with the story of a Chinese-American teenager who rebels against his minority status in a U.S. high school. Kim, whose short-story collection casts a humorous eye on the foibles of Korean-American characters living in northern California, has the viewpoint of a first-

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Program Helps High School Dropouts Re-start Their Educations . . .

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achieved 42 of the 60 credits needed for an associate's degree, typically granted in a two-year college program.

Portland Community College cites as one of its success stories Leah Gibson, a girl with a part Lakota Sioux (American Indian) and part Persian background, who became addicted to drugs and alcohol as a teen and dropped out of three different high schools by the age of 16.

Gibson not only completed her high school diploma via Gateway to College, but became student body president and student commencement speaker, and earned her associate of arts degree — all while

working two jobs to support her family, volunteering in a variety of capacities and mentoring American Indian high school students.

"A lot of students tell us they didn't leave high school because they were academically unable but because they were academically uninterested," Mathern said. "One of the reasons Gateway to College is inspiring for many students and makes them reconsider their educational future is because college courses feel like they are a part of their life."

The Gateway to College National Network plans to expand to 50 partner programs within the next five to seven years, starting between three and seven new programs each year, Mathern said.

"We're looking to work with partners who are interested in providing a path to college for students others have given up on in terms of education. They're going to need something from our community one way or the other. We want them to have family-wage employment throughout their lifetime rather than come back and need to depend on the community for services."

For more information on the Gateway to College Network (<http://www.gatewaytocollege.org/index.asp>), see the program's Web site.

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

Reducing Nuclear Arsenals Is a Critical U.S.-Russian Concern . . .

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in one area does not preclude cooperative work in other areas.

"As far as the situation in the Caucasus — especially in the South Caucasus — we have discussed it today," Lavrov said. "True, we do have obvious differences. But we

agree on one thing: We need to do our best in order to achieve stability there."

On the nuclear weapons ambitions of Iran and North Korea, both Clinton and Lavrov said they are working together and through multilateral groups to find a resolution that will prevent the further proliferation

of nuclear weapons.

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/>). ♦

Graphic Novels: An Evolving Art Form Tackles New Themes . . .

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generation Korean American who came of age in the United States but still retains memories of South Korea. Friends as well as colleagues, Yang and Kim have collaborated on a newly published work, *The Eternal Smile* (2009),

with Yang providing the dialogue and Kim supplying the art work.

Graphic novels are attracting a rapidly expanding fan base. Above all, authors like Tomine are interested in using the genre simply to tell a good story. "The best compliment someone could give me about

Shortcomings is that they simply enjoyed reading it," said Tomine.

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

State Department Official Encourages Dialogue with Muslim World

By Ralph Dannheisser
Special Correspondent

Washington — President Obama and his administration are fully committed to pursuing “a deep and positive dialogue with Muslims around the world based on mutual respect and in support of our mutual interests,” according to a key State Department official.

The magnitude of the challenges faced makes it vital to go beyond interactions between governments to “reach out and develop partnerships with all elements of civil society,” said acting Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs Madelyn Spirnak.

Public diplomacy, Spirnak said, “lies at the heart of America’s smart power,” and requires listening and not simply lecturing others.

“We ... will not always agree,” she said, “but we are prepared to listen to and talk with partners with whom we disagree in order to understand each other better and advance mutual interests.”

Spirnak, who oversees the department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative, said the United States has made a concerted effort to reach out to Muslim youth, particularly those vulnerable to extremism, “through English language training programs, high school and undergraduate exchanges, and sports programs.” Such programs, she said, “target youth at risk and provide an alternative vision of hope and opportunity.”

Spirnak spoke May 5 at the 10th annual conference of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy, a Washington-based nonprofit advo-



Congressman Keith Ellison, a Muslim American, noted that Muslims play a role in all aspects of American life.

cacy group that describes itself as “dedicated to studying Islamic and democratic political thought and merging them into a modern Islamic democratic discourse.”

Her talk followed a daylong series of panel discussions and speeches by academics and officials of non-profit groups in the United States and abroad, mostly from a Muslim perspective, on the theme “How to improve relations with the Muslim world.”

AMERICAN MUSLIMS PLAY IMPORTANT ROLE IN SHAPING DIALOGUE

Spirnak said the U.S. government welcomes dialogue with Muslim-American communities, which she said “play a constructive and important role in improving the public policy of our country.” She told her heavily Muslim-American audience, “Muslim Americans are not outsiders looking in; you are a part of the

fabric of this country and have been for generations.”

“The United States is part of the Muslim world,” said Representative Keith Ellison of Minnesota, one of two Muslims serving in Congress. Ellison said 6 million Muslims live in the United States and are “involved in every aspect of American life.” They include at least 17 elected officials from across the country, he said.

“There is no strict separation between the United States and the Muslim world. You and I and many of us in this room are evidence of that fact,” Ellison said. “People who want to drive a wedge and create this sharp division want us to think of the United States as other than the Muslim world.”

Building bridges is important “because we live in a world that is so very interconnected,” Ellison said. “As Americans of whatever faith, we have to seek the new relationship, the new interaction.”

But bridge-building needs to be two-way, he said. “There’s nothing in Islam that teaches people that they should dislike the United States.”

Ellison urged his audience to oppose human rights abuses in Muslim countries, just as elsewhere. “Don’t let Muslim-majority countries off the hook, simply because we share their faith,” he said.

Ellison cited as an example his own protest April 27 outside the Sudanese Embassy over that nation’s actions in Darfur. He was among five members of Congress and three other activists who submitted to

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Online Maps Enable Citizens to Report, Track Events

By Michelle Austein Brooks
Staff Writer

Washington — Online mapping tools like MapQuest and Google Maps are known for helping people get from Point A to B. With the help of some technical experts, these maps can also be used to track and monitor critical events in real time.

As violence broke out following Kenya's December 2007 presidential elections, Erik Hersman, who grew up in Kenya and Sudan but was in the United States at the time, realized how difficult it was to get specific information about where violence was occurring. With the help of friends — some in Kenya, others in the United States — he built a simple mapping Web site named Ushahidi (which means "testimony" in Swahili) that tracked the violence.

In a country where traveling and getting information was difficult, Ushahidi enabled anyone with a mobile phone to report an incident and "say where they are and what's going on, so we could have some record of what was happening around Kenya," Hersman told America.gov. The best way to get information "was to go straight to the people, start gauging what was going on in their lives by SMS messages."

"We provide a way to source information from areas that aren't capable of doing it any other way," he said.

The information people submitted was displayed on a map, highlighting incident locations and allowing users to click on points to gain



more details. Ushahidi's mapping program, known by technical experts as a crowd sourcing tool, enables users to gather and document a great deal of information gathered from a community on a specific topic.

Creating such a tool did not require knowledge of cutting-edge technology, Hersman said, noting that the technology had been available for years and it took just two days to build the site.

SHARING TOOLS

"Technologists are good at what they do and can create interesting things. And by and large, technologists make a pretty healthy salary, so we don't have to worry about a lot," Hersman said. "But we look around the world, and we're from parts of the world oftentimes that do have struggles. So you look at ways you can use the gifts and talents you have to effect change in those areas."

So when Ushahidi's tracking of the Kenyan elections drew attention from humanitarian groups eager to use a similar platform, Hersman created an open-source tool allowing anyone to take the code and develop their own mapping and tracking tools, "without starting from scratch," he said. While the Usha-

hidi team has worked directly with organizations to help them set up their own maps on Web sites, anyone can take Ushahidi's code and build their own page.

"There's real power in creating platforms," Hersman said. "Here is a basic tool set that allows you to do a number of different things. ... We can't come up with all the instances you might use it for, so let's just give you something to play with and go from there."

Among those who have used the Ushahidi platform is Gaurav Mishra. Mishra, a Yahoo Fellow in Residence at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University in Washington, had long been thinking about how technology could be used to promote social change in his home country of India. He saw the value of online tools such as Twitter for reporting the latest information during ongoing events like the November 2008 terrorist attack in Mumbai. But there was a need to find a way to better track events over a sustained period of time, Mishra told America.gov.

Using Ushahidi's basic mapping tool and with the help of about 35 volunteers scattered across the globe, Vote Report India was built in a

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Online Maps Enable Citizens to Report, Track Events . . .

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week. A Web site featuring a map enabling average people to report and track election-related events, Vote Report India provides real-time information about the elections. India's national elections are held over five phases which began April 16 and conclude May 13.

Visitors to the Vote Report India site can see where incidents of violence, voter bribery, voting machine malfunctions or other problems have occurred. The Web site provides instructions for those who want to report their own event: They can do so via Internet form, Twitter tweet, e-mail or text message. The site

also aggregates video and photos of the elections.

"It's not that we're doing something new here. We're just aggregating everything together," so all the information is available in one place, Mishra said.

In the case of Vote Report India, efforts are made to ensure the reported information is accurate; reports are verified and moderated by volunteers. This means that some



Erik Hersman (second from right) and his team got together to go over the latest and greatest Ushahidi news.

citizen observations may not make it online. But how much editorial control is exercised is up to the user. In the case of Ushahidi's map tracking H1N1 influenza (<http://swineflu.ushahidi.com/>), unverified accounts from citizens are included.

With a number of elections coming up this year, groups in other countries are considering similar voting-report Web sites. Ushahidi is helping a group in Lebanon use the tool to monitor and track its June elec-

tions.

More information about Ushahidi and its code is available on the organization's Web site (<http://www.ushahidi.com/>). See also Vote Report India (<http://www.votereport.in/>).

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

State Department Official Encourages Dialogue with Muslim World . . .

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arrest on civil disobedience charges for crossing police lines in an effort to draw public attention to Darfur.

At a conference closing ceremony, Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy Executive Director Rad-

wan Masmoudi presented the group's Muslim Democrat of the Year award to Ahmed Shaheed, foreign minister of the Maldives — the first sitting government official to receive the award in its 10-year history.

The award recognizes Shaheed for

his "role in building democracy and preserving it in the face of hardship, for promoting tolerance and harmony, and for opening a window into a century of reason, freedom, human rights and democracy in the Maldives and South Asia." ♦

Press Freedom in Russia on Downward Slope, Report Says

By Leah Dow
Staff Writer

Washington — Growing restrictions on the print and electronic press in Russia are reminiscent of the Kremlin's tight control of media during the Soviet period, according to a new report from Freedom House.

"Media freedom continued to decline in 2008, with the Kremlin relying on Soviet-style media management to facilitate a sensitive political transition as well as deflecting responsibility for widespread corruption and political violence," the report said.

Freedom House, the nearly 70-year-old U.S.-based non-governmental organization dedicated to research on democracy and human rights, issued on May 1 its latest report, concluding that press freedom globally continues to decline. The biggest declines are concentrated in Russia and other former Soviet Union countries, marking what the report calls the "steady closing of what had previously been a much freer media space."

Legal pressure and attempts to control broadcast media outlets have created a political landscape where the ability of Russian citizens to make informed choices has been compromised, the report said.

Despite Russian constitutional provisions protecting press freedom, the report cites self-censorship by journalists as they try to prevent retribution in the form of harassment, physical or otherwise; the targeting of independent media outlets by regulators; and the inability

of the "pliant" judiciary to protect journalists as factors that allow the Kremlin to dominate and control media.

"The Kremlin used the country's politicized and corrupt criminal justice system to harass and prosecute the few remaining independent journalists who dared to criticize the widespread abuses committed by authorities," the report said.



A woman protests outside the Kremlin in Moscow against the lack of media freedom in Russia.

It noted that 16 media figures, including Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya, director of the opposition Web site ingushetiya.ru Magomed Yevloyev, and reporter Tamerlan Alishayev were murdered because of their efforts to expose human rights abuses and corruption.

Internet reporters and bloggers have also faced troubles, Freedom House said.

In March, Freedom House released a report titled "Freedom on the Net: A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media" that analyzed the Internet environment in 15 countries including Russia, China, India and the United Kingdom. The report gave Russia a grade of "partly free," saying that while

there have not been any "significant" cases of technical blocking or filtering, authorities increasingly have engaged in intentional content removal, and bloggers have been subject not only to hackers, but also to physical violence and legal prosecution.

"Although the [Russian] constitution grants the right of free speech, there are no special laws protecting online modes of expression, and even constitutional guarantees are routinely violated," the March report said.

Freedom House said that prior to parliamentary elections, 10 popular bloggers were targeted by political operatives allegedly affiliated with the government.

"The blogs were ravaged and defaced. DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attacks became another powerful instrument of the Kremlin's hidden influence," the report said.

While cases of systematic blocking have not been well documented, harassment by telephone is extremely common and widespread.

"Security agencies, the Kremlin and regional administration officials call owners, shareholders, and anyone else in a position to remove unwanted material and ensure that the problem does not come up again," the report said.

After such calls are made, Web editors and managers are much more inclined to practice self-censorship; one such director explained that his company gets around 100 requests a day to "black out" content that is nationalistic or anti-government. ♦

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See also

<http://www.america.gov/>

Telling America's story

New Research Reveals Droughts Common . . .

(Continued from page 4)

ner with locals so that communities are willing to implement plans to reduce vulnerability to drought. "This isn't the kind of thing that can be done in one or two visits, but rather requires sustained interactions."

DROUGHT-RESISTANT PLANTS

While climate scientists work to predict the frequency and severity of future droughts, biologists are researching ways to make plants more resistant to drought.

An international team of scientists discovered a gene that improves plant tolerance to drought. The team's results, which will appear in the May 22 issue of Science magazine, suggest that chemicals that turn on this and related genes one day could be used to improve crop yields during drought.

"I am very optimistic that a chemical contribution to the drought problem is feasible," said lead researcher Sean Cutler, a biologist at the University of California in Riverside. "However, until we have the right molecules in hand, we can't say anything with absolute certainty."

Cutler wants policymakers to make this strategy a priority. "The resources for basic research in plant biology are very meager," Cutler told America.gov. "I would like to see the development of these kinds of molecules a major priority at funding agencies."

As for competition from other researchers, Cutler welcomes it. "I would be thrilled if others get in on trying to realize this goal and try to beat me to the punch at my own mission. I think this is a huge problem and we need armies of labs working to solve it." ♦

Anti-Piracy Efforts Along Africa Coast Show Some Success . . .

(Continued from page 5)

to be able to leverage its collaborative counterpiracy efforts into increased security cooperation in the maritime domain with nontraditional partners such as China, India and Russia, and bring added focus to regional capacity-building programs.

Mull said the United States has a "multifaceted strategy" to suppress piracy and that the State Department is working with interagency partners to integrate maritime and land-based efforts in Somalia into a comprehensive strategy.

"Our strategic goals are to protect shipping, particularly Americans

and U.S.-linked ships; capitalize on international awareness and mobilize cooperation to address the problem; and create a more permanent maritime security arrangement in the region," Mull said.

He acknowledged, however, that "significant factors affect our pursuit of these goals, including the enormous difficulties inherent in patrolling, or even monitoring through technical means, such a huge expanse of open sea; and, of course, the broader problem of Somalia itself. Legal challenges also exist, including inadequate domestic legal authorities in some states as well as a lack of willingness on the part of some to prosecute suspected pirates."

Acts of piracy more than doubled in the Gulf of Aden area during 2008. The area spans the Horn of Africa and Somalia's north coast and is a vital shipping lane connecting the Middle East, Europe, Asia and the Americas. In 2008, an estimated \$30 million in ransoms was paid to pirates who hijacked vessels in the Gulf of Aden. 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/>). ♦