



# Weekly Special Report



Produced by the Public Affairs Section

## INSIDE

### Bush Promotes Mideast Peace Plan, Security in Gulf

By David McKeeby  
Staff Writer

Washington -- In meetings with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah, President Bush underlined the U.S. commitment to helping Palestinian and Israeli leaders realize their goal of a peace settlement and a Palestinian state by the end of 2008 and urged regional leaders to continue their support.



"They want to see a deal done. They want progress

(Continued on page 4)

President Bush, left, with Saudi King Abdullah, right, as they watch the King's personal thoroughbreds march by at Al Janadriyah Farm, Saudi Arabia, Tuesday, Jan. 15, 2008. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

### United States To Provide \$200,000 for Emergency Relief in Kenya



Helpers rest after unloading sacks of food for distribution at a camp for displaced people in Eldoret, Kenya, January 8. (AP Images)

Washington -- The United States will provide \$200,000 to the Kenya Red Cross Society for relief supplies for people displaced by violence related to the disputed presidential election, according to a January 7 press release from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

As of January 2, an estimated 100,000 people, primarily in western Kenya,

(Continued on page 2)

#### LOCAL NEWS

Cultural Attache and Chief of Basic Education Services Attend 50th Anniversary Celebration of Debre Berhan Teacher Training College (P 2)

#### HUMAN RIGHTS NEWS

Presidential Proclamation on Religious Freedom Day 2008 (P 3)

#### AMERICAN ISSUES

Ties Between U.S. and Muslim Cities Grow (P 5)

New "Sunshine" Measure Supports Openness in U.S. Government (P 6)

#### PEACE AND SECURITY

Bush Promotes Freedom, Justice Across the Middle East (P 7)

Bush Pledges Support to Israelis, Palestinians Working for Peace (P 8)

#### ECONOMIC ISSUE

Trade Spurs Economic Growth Among Poorest Countries (P 9)

#### INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

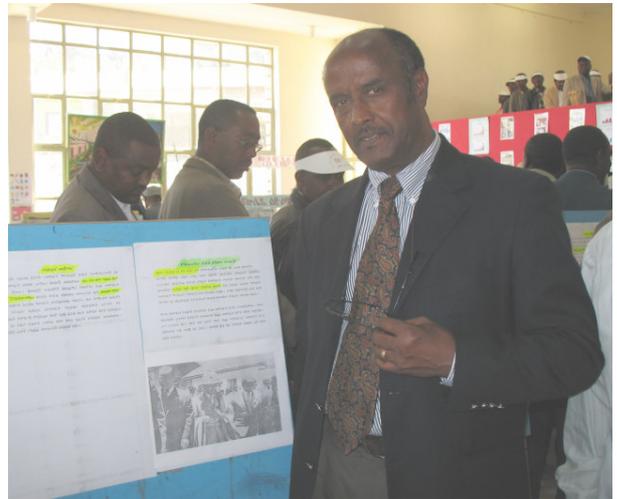
Mechanics Training for Iraqi Army Fuels Engine for Change (P 10)

Computer Center Builds Skills, Networks for Palestinian Youth (P 11)

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## Cultural Attache and Chief of Basic Education Services Attend 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of Debre Berhan Teacher Training College

Cultural Attache Patricia Johnson, U.S. Embassy, and Chief of Basic Education Services, Ato Aberra Mekonnen, USAID, attended the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Debre Berhan Teacher Training College on January 13. Patricia Johnson delivered remarks, noting the extensive American involvement in the institution. It was built as a Teacher Training Institute (TTI), was built in 1957 with Point Four (precursor of USAID) support. Peace Corps volunteers figured prominently in the staffing of TTI until 1974. Since 1998 USAID has been actively involved in the institution through Basic Education Strategic Objectives (BESO). As a center of excellence, the Debre Berhan Teacher Training College has established linkages with neighbouring primary schools, pioneered in demonstration classrooms and developed a center for production of textbooks and learning materials. Debra Berhan Teacher Training College has trained almost 40,000 teachers in its fifty years of existence. ♦



*Ato Aberra shows announcement of original inauguration of Debre Berhan TTI in 1957*

## United States To Provide \$200,000 for Emergency Relief in Kenya . . .

*(Continued from page 1)*

had been displaced since the December 27, 2007, election, according to the Red Cross Society. Media reports indicate approximately 500 deaths have resulted from election-related violence. On January 3, U.S. Ambassador Michael Ranneberger declared an "urgent need for assistance in response to the humanitarian situation," the release said.

USAID said its staff members in Kenya are coordinating with other U.S. and international agencies to facilitate humanitarian assistance to affected populations.

President Bush January 7 said he welcomed the visit of African Union Chairman John Kufuor to Kenya's capital, Nairobi, to facilitate talks to

resolve Kenya's political crisis.

"I condemn the use of violence as a political tool and appeal to both sides to engage in peaceful dialogue aimed at finding a lasting political solution," Bush said.

The latest emergency assistance is in addition to the more than \$300 million in USAID development support to Kenya for health, economic growth, democracy and governance, peace and security and other humanitarian assistance programs.

The United States also has provided emergency relief to other countries in Africa affected by conflict. For example, since 2005 the United States has given more than \$4 billion in humanitarian, peacekeeping, reconstruction and development aid to Sudan. The USAID development

program in Sudan, involving health, education, infrastructure and governance efforts, is the largest such program in Africa, according to a November 2007 State Department fact sheet.

Kenya is one of the 15 countries targeted by the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI). In addition, there are 144 Peace Corps volunteers currently serving the country in education, including deaf education, small business development, and health and HIV/AIDS prevention programs.

Nairobi hosts the largest U.S. diplomatic mission in sub-Saharan Africa. The United States works closely with Kenya on a range of regional concerns, including the Comprehensive Peace Agreement to

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## Presidential Proclamation on Religious Freedom Day 2008

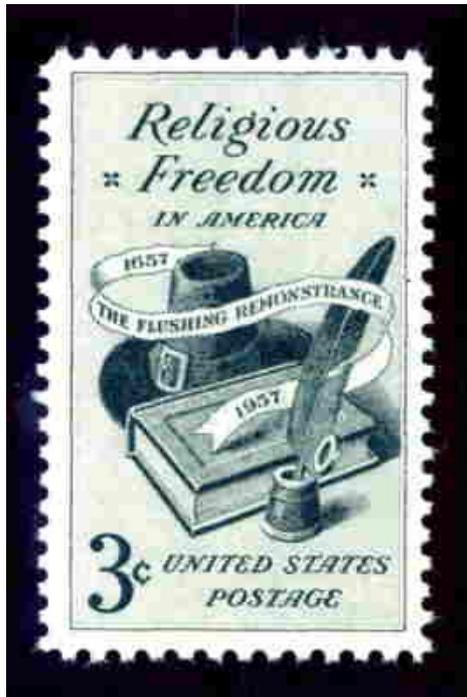
THE WHITE HOUSE  
Office of the Press Secretary  
(Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)  
January 14, 2008

### RELIGIOUS FREEDOM DAY, 2008

#### BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA A PROCLAMATION

Thomas Jefferson counted the freedom of worship as one of America's greatest blessings. He said it was "a liberty deemed in other countries incompatible with good government, and yet proved by our experience to be its best support." On Religious Freedom Day, we celebrate the 1786 passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.

The freedom to worship according to one's conscience is one of our Nation's most cherished values. It is the first protection offered in the Bill of Rights: that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In America, people of different faiths can live together united in peace, tolerance, and humility. We are committed to the proposition that as equal citizens of the United States



of America, all are free to worship as they choose.

In an era during which an unprecedented number of nations have embraced individual freedom, we have also witnessed the stubborn endurance of religious repression. Religious freedom belongs not to any one nation, but to the world, and my Administration continues to support freedom of worship at home and abroad. On Religious Freedom

Day and throughout the year, we recognize the importance of religious freedom and the vital role it plays in spreading liberty and ensuring human dignity.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim January 16, 2008, as Religious Freedom Day. I call on all Americans to reflect on the great blessing of religious liberty, endeavor to preserve this freedom for future generations, and commemorate this day with appropriate events and activities.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this fourteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand eight, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-second.

GEORGE W. BUSH

*(Distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)* ♦

## United States To Provide \$200,000 for Emergency . . .

*(Continued from page 2)*

resolve hostilities in Sudan and bilateral initiatives on Somalia.

The United States provides assistance to 47 countries in Africa. U.S. foreign assistance to Africa is directed to helping African governments and institutions and African-based organizations incorporate good governance reforms and innovative

approaches to health, education, economic growth, agriculture and environmental protection.

*(Distributed by the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)* ♦

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## Bush Promotes Mideast Peace Plan, Security in Gulf . . .

(Continued from page 1)

because the issue frustrates them. This issue is kind of the touchstone in their mind for a lot of other problems in the Middle East; you solve this, then a lot of other problems go away," Bush said January 15 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Bush praised the Saudi king's decision to send his foreign minister and thanked Gulf leaders for their active support at the 2007 Annapolis Conference, which he said sent a powerful message for peace to Palestinians, Israelis and the wider region.

In a private audience with King Abdullah, and with leaders in Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates during his eight-day mission to the Middle East, Bush said that he has shared his personal observations on the peace process and how the United States intends to support the Israeli-Palestinian talks. Bush urged the leaders to keep up to momentum toward peace.

"In order for this to work, they've got to be supportive of the Palestinians, and make it clear that Israel is an important part of the future of the Middle East," Bush said.

### RICE VISITS BAGHDAD

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, accompanying Bush on his consultations, made an unannounced visit to Iraq January 15 following a January 12 vote by the Iraqi parliament to allow some former members of the Baath Party to

return to government jobs -- one of 18 indicators, or benchmarks, defined by Iraqi authorities to measure political progress.

"From the time that I was here a month ago, I've seen ... continued progress on the political front," Rice said at a briefing with her Iraqi counterpart, Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari.



*U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) walks with Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi (2nd L) and Shi'ite cleric Abdul Aziz al-Hakim (R), the leader of the Islamic Supreme Council, during a visit in Baghdad January 15, 2008. REUTERS/Iraqi Government Office/Handout (IRAQ).*

Rice urged Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's government to take advantage of improving security and political conditions to continue pushing for additional reforms, including legislation on holding provincial elections as well as a key law on sharing the country's oil and gas resources among its different ethnic and religious groups.

"These improvements do show that Iraqis can count on a future with this democracy, a future in which violence is not necessarily a daily way of life, but it's going to take a really large effort by these political leaders to push forward," Rice said.

### NEW SECURITY ASSISTANCE ANNOUNCED

Security challenges from Iran also were on the president's regional agenda, and Bush further demonstrated U.S. commitment to helping Saudi Arabia and its neighbors with a January 15 announcement that the United States intends to provide Riyadh with 900 state-of-the-art satellite-guided missiles, among the most sophisticated weapons systems produced by the United States, as part of a \$20 billion security package for six Gulf nations.

"The United States is strengthening our long-standing security commitments with our friends in the Gulf -- and rallying friends around the world to confront this danger before it is too late," Bush said January 13 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Under U.S. law, Congress has 30 days to disapprove of the \$123 million missile sale, but key members of Congress already have expressed support for the plan, giving the administration confidence that it will be approved.

Bush will complete his visit to the region with meetings in Egypt before returning to Washington January 16.

For more information, see Peace & Security ( <http://fpolicy.america.gov/fpolicy/security/index.html> ).

*(USINFO is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)* ♦

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## Ties Between U.S. and Muslim Cities Grow

By Phillip Kurata  
Staff Writer

**Washington** -- One of the leading citizen diplomacy groups in the United States -- Sister Cities International -- is fostering understanding between the United States and the Muslim world by increasing contact between ordinary citizens across the cultural divide.

"Since [September 11, 2001], one of our focuses has been trying to bridge the Muslim and Western worlds and dispel cultural misunderstandings. We have been trying to build more partnerships and reactivate partnerships that already exist with new ideas and new opportunities," said Patrick Madden, executive director of Sister Cities International.

The number of relationships between U.S. cities and cities in predominantly

Muslim countries now stands at 94, and about 20 new relationships are developing, according to Jennifer Oliver, the program manager for the Sister Cities' Islamic Partnership Initiative.

"We see this as going to the next level, where we have relationships in every state, every county in the United States with different parts of the Muslim world," she said.

To accelerate its outreach to the Muslim world, Sister Cities International has been organizing Partnership and Peace Tours, taking representatives from U.S. cities to differ-



*Forty-two delegates from across the U.S. joined Sister Cities International's Partnership & Peace Tour to Egypt from October 25 to November 3, 2007.*

ent parts of the region for the past three years. The first tour was organized for Morocco in 2006, and the second, to Egypt in 2007.

"In Morocco, we've seen six or seven new sister-city relationships created. When we were in Egypt, representatives from three or four U.S. cities showed an interest in forming relationships with Egypt," Oliver said.

The third tour is scheduled for Israel and Jordan in March, and the participants will be keen to spot economic opportunities, according to Madden. "That was one of the top

things that Jordanian Embassy officials said they hope will come out of our trip to Israel and Jordan in the spring. They would like to see some trade and business opportunities develop," he said.

Sister Cities, founded in 1956 by former President Dwight Eisenhower, has developed a network of more than 700 U.S. cities, which have formed partnerships with almost 2,500 cities abroad. Earlier in its history, Sister Cities played a vigorous role in fostering contact

and understanding between the United States and Japan, which were enemies in World War II and today are solid friends.

"The basic concept was to get government and formal diplomacy out of the way and let ordinary citizens travel abroad, meet other ordinary citizens, walk the streets, see

their cultural sites, eat their food, and the one thing that they'll realize is that we're all the same. We might have some differences of opinion, but we have more in common than differences," said Madden.

Many Americans involved in Sister Cities say that terrorism and safety concerns inhibit relationship building between the United States and the Islamic world and that most Americans do not understand Islamic culture.

"We see ourselves playing an edu-

*(Continued on page 13)*

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## New "Sunshine" Measure Supports Openness in U.S. Government

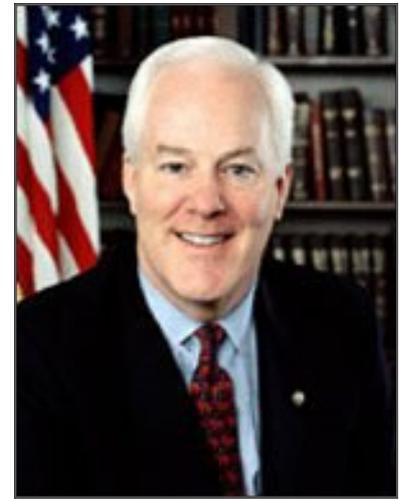
By Eric Green  
Staff Writer

**Washington** -- With little fanfare, a new U.S. law has been enacted aimed at increasing transparency and openness in the American federal government.

The measure, signed by President Bush on December 31, 2007, strengthens the ability of the press and the general public to gain information from the government through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The signing attracted scant notice in the news media, and the White House issued a one-paragraph statement on Bush's action.

But a number of groups devoted to openness in government said they were pleased by the new law. Clint Brewer, president of the Society of Professional Journalists, told America.gov that "as a journalist and taxpayer, I'm thrilled the president signed" the bill. "I hope this is a sign that the pendulum is swinging back toward more open and transparent government" in the United States, he said.

Brewer said that for years, FOIA requests "have gone ignored or been stonewalled by federal agencies." He said the new law, called the Open Government Act of 2007, gives working journalists and citizens alike "the ability to fight back" to get information without having to resort to costly lawsuits.



*Senator Patrick Leahy (L) and Senator John Cornyn (R), Sponsors of the bill*

Brewer, also the executive editor of the City Paper in Nashville, Tennessee, said the FOIA is "often looked at as an issue for journalists -- and it is a huge issue for journalists. But it's also an issue for corporate America, which makes a lot of FOIA requests, and for regular citizens in professions other than journalism who want to know a lot about their government too."



*Clint Brewer, president of the Society of Professional Journalists*

Brewer said citizens making FOIA requests to gain public information represents "a healthy democracy," which involves "people asking questions of their government. That is what freedom of speech is all about."

The United States passed the FOIA in 1966, becoming at the time one of the few countries in the world to provide a legal way in which any person or organization could ask for records held by federal government agencies. Similar

laws also have been enacted at the state level.

The Open Government Act reforms the 1966 law by creating an "ombudsman" to mediate FOIA cases. It also imposes new requirements on federal agencies to increase the timeliness of their FOIA responses and new procedures for tracking FOIA requests so they do not become mired or lost in the federal bureaucracy. The measure also expands the definition of the "news media" to include bloggers and non-traditional journalists. (See related article ( <http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=August&x=200708291251141xeneerg0.6091425> ).)

Senator Patrick Leahy (Democrat of Vermont), a sponsor of the bill, said it provides the first reforms to the FOIA in more than a decade. In a January 2 statement, Leahy said the law offers a "ray of sunshine and a turning point toward greater accountability" in government. Leahy says the measure exempts national security and homeland se-

*(Continued on page 12)*

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## Bush Promotes Freedom, Justice Across the Middle East

By Merle Kellerhals  
Staff Writer

**Washington** -- President Bush is encouraging the advance of freedom and justice throughout the Middle East during his eight-day trip in the region, but he also is warning of the dangers posed by those who promote extremism, terrorism and insurgency that threaten regional security and undermine societies.

"For decades, the people of this region saw their desire for liberty and justice denied at home and dismissed abroad in the name of stability. Today your aspirations are threatened by violent extremists who murder the innocent in pursuit of power," Bush said during remarks January 13 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

The president began his eight-day regional visit by focusing attention on an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that would lead to creation of a Palestinian state. Israeli and Palestinian negotiators opened talks January 14 in Jerusalem, led by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and former Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurie. The talks will focus on sensitive final status issues such as borders for the Palestinian state, the fate of Jerusalem, Israeli settlements in the Palestinian Territories and the future of some Palestinian refugees. Israeli and Palestinian leaders have pledged to try and reach a conclusion to the talks by the end of 2008.

Another aspect of President Bush's mission to the Middle East is to address substantive regional security



*President George W. Bush delivers remarks from the stage of the auditorium at the Emirates Palace Hotel in Abu Dhabi Sunday, Jan. 13, 2008*

issues such as the threat posed by a nuclear-armed Iran and Iran's support for terrorists and insurgencies in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories and Afghanistan.

"One cause of instability is the extremists supported and embodied by the regime that sits in Tehran. Iran is today the world's leading state sponsor of terror," the president said.

While the struggle against the forces of extremism is one of the greatest of our time, Bush said, extremists will be defeated by those who desire freedom and justice -- something extremists cannot take

away. Because of that threat, Bush told allies the United States will strengthen its long-standing security commitments in the Gulf region.

Bush arrived in Saudi Arabia January 14 for two days of talks to support peacemaking before concluding his trip in Egypt. Bush already has visited Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

*(USINFO is a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State. Web site: <http://usinfo.state.gov>)* ♦

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## Bush Pledges Support to Israelis, Palestinians Working for Peace

By David McKeeby  
USINFO Staff Writer

**Washington** -- After separate meetings with Palestinian and Israeli leaders January 9 and January 10, President Bush said he is increasingly confident that what might have been unlikely even a year ago is not only possible, but necessary: the creation of a Palestinian state by the end of 2008.

"Is it possible for the Israelis and the Palestinians to work out their differences?"

Bush asked January 10 in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

"My answer is, absolutely, it's possible. Not only is it possible, it's necessary. And I'm looking forward to helping."

Bush urged both sides January 10 to continue intensive diplomatic engage-

ment to build on the momentum of the November 2007 Annapolis Conference, where Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert joined Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to restart talks with the goal of concluding a peace agreement and setting the stage for a Palestinian state by the end of 2008.

"I am confident that with proper help, the state of Palestine will emerge. And I'm confident that when it emerges it will be a major step toward peace," Bush said.

Despite new challenges since Annapolis, Abbas and Olmert have met

to urge negotiators to seek compromise on the core issues at the heart of a half century of conflict, including borders of a future Palestinian state, security guarantees and settlements and the fate of thousands of Palestinian refugees around the region.



*President Bush (C) clasps hands with Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (L) and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas at the Israel-Palestinian Peace Conference at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis November 27, 2007. REUTERS/Loay Abu Haykel*

"In order for there to be lasting peace, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert have to come together and make tough choices. And I'm convinced they will," Bush said.

On the second stop of his eight-day visit to the Middle East, Bush's helicopter flight from Jerusalem to the West Bank was grounded by dense fog, giving his motorcade an opportunity to view several of the challenges facing Israeli and Palestinian negotiators, including security checkpoints, a controversial system of separation barriers and unauthorized Israeli settlement activity on

Palestinian territory.

"I can understand why the Palestinians are frustrated driving through checkpoints," Bush said. "I can also understand that until confidence is gained on both sides, why the Israelis would want there to be a sense of security."

Returning to Jerusalem later in the evening, Bush called on negotiators to further the cause of the Palestinian state with borders that are viable, contiguous and secure; urged Israelis to end settlement expansions and Palestinians to confront extremism; and appealed for compromise on the future status of Jerusalem.

As Israelis and Palestinians negotiate, the United States has committed to helping them address security, settlements and other related issues by monitoring implementation of the Quartet road map -- a plan developed by the United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the United States. (See text

( <http://usinfo.state.gov/mena/Archive/2004/Feb/04-725518.html> ) of road map.)

The Israeli-Palestinian peace process and regional security issues will top Bush's agenda for the rest of the trip as he meets with leaders in Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt.

Bush also will meet with the Quartet's special representative, former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for an update on efforts to help the Palestinian Authority develop and implement reforms to lay the groundwork for future statehood.♦

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## Trade Spurs Economic Growth Among Poorest Countries

By Elizabeth Kelleher  
Staff Writer

**Washington** – Developing countries participating in liberal trade have enjoyed an average annual economic growth rate of 5 percent during the most recent wave of globalization from the 1990s to present.

“China and Vietnam are two good examples of countries whose growth rates accelerated after they joined the WTO (World Trade Organization) and further liberalized their trade regimes,” said David Dollar in an e-mail to America.gov. Dollar is a World Bank country director for China and co-author of the book *Globalization, Growth and Poverty*. Dollar’s World Bank colleague, Paul Collier, is the other co-author.

Dollar said that, as those countries became more open to trade, they created confidence and attracted foreign investment and technology.

The Economist magazine predicts real GDP growth to average almost 8 percent for Vietnam and 9 percent for China annually over the

coming five years.

Dollar’s and Collier’s book focuses on what happened during the 1990s in what the authors call the



*David Dollar, World Bank country director for China*

“new globalizing” developing countries. The book states that during the 1990s, the rate of growth in per capita gross domestic product (GDP) for those countries increased by 5 percent annually. It is a trend that has continued during the early 2000s.

The authors attribute recent economic success in many large, developing countries to advances in transportation and com-

munications and to the fact that these countries opened up to foreign trade and investment. One result: manufactured goods rose from less than 25 percent of developing country exports in 1980 to more than 80 percent by 1998.

Dollar and Collier name Brazil, Hungary, India, Malaysia, Mexico, the Philippines and Thailand, as well as China, among the countries taking the strongest pro-trade measures in recent years and point out that 24 developing countries doubled their trade levels from 1980 to 2000. Countries with liberal trade policies

have seen faster GDP growth than countries not participating in globalization, according to the authors.

The book notes that the more globalized developing countries are not drawn from those that were higher-income developing countries to begin with, whose economies tended to rely on export of natural resources. In fact, the more globalized developing countries were among the poorer countries.

The new globalizers cut import tariffs significantly. They also established reliable property rights, liberal investment climates and strong rule of law. Since 1980, they have made strides in basic education. The average years of primary schooling for adults increased from 2.4 years to 3.8 years in the fast-growth developing countries.

“The spread of basic education tends to reduce inequality and raise health standards, as well as being complementary to the process of raising productivity,” Dollar and Collier conclude. This is important, the authors say, because while there is economic pressure for migration among countries, “compared to 100 years ago, the world is much less globalized when it comes to labor flows.” ♦

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## Mechanics Training for Iraqi Army Fuels Engine for Change

By Jim Fisher-Thompson  
Special Correspondent

Baghdad -- One hundred and eighty-nine smiling Iraqi jundi (soldiers) received certificates for successfully completing a rigorous 10-week mechanics course December 30, 2007, knowing they will now play an integral role as engines for change powering their army.

The graduation ceremony, at the Iraqi Army Sixth Division's base in West Baghdad, was an example of the way the U.S. Army is partnering with the Iraqi military to move it toward self-sufficiency.

Referring to his soldier-students, head trainer Theo Koster, a South African contractor, said, "It's a small fire we've started, but if they kindle it they're going to be a great benefit to this army."

Koster touched on the growing self-sufficiency within the Iraqi defense forces, which means less dependence on U.S.-led coalition forces for operational and logistics support.

"The quality of the students was also quite good," he said, noting that 98 percent of the soldiers in the course passed, with 12 jundi singled out for special distinction. "The students must realize what they've got now [knowledge], no one can take away," he added. "It's up to them to make the best of it."

The graduation ceremony began with a soldier memorializing the division's comrades killed in terrorist

action with a recitation from the Quran. The assembled jundi then repeated the oath of loyalty to the Iraqi Army.

The Iraqi training commander greeted his American guests and

Baghdad, Kirkush and Habbaniyah.

U.S. Army Colonel Robby Robinson, deputy commander of the military transition team that helped coordinate the \$3 million U.S.-government-funded effort, said,



*Instructor Theo Koster reviews engine mechanics with Iraqi Army students.  
(U.S. Embassy Baghdad)*

thanked the U.S. government for its assistance. He noted that the timing of the ceremony was significant because it was within a week of the anniversary of the Iraqi Army's establishment in 1921.

The senior Iraqi Army officer present, the Sixth Division chief of staff, handed out the certificates to the top 20 students in the course, congratulating each for their achievement.

The Iraqi-owned Fiafi Group has been engaged by the U.S. military to operate five motor maintenance courses a year for the Iraqi Army in

"The maintenance program is not only meant to instill critical skills among these men, but to build the capacity of the Iraqi Army to effectively maintain its own vehicles."

Robinson's team works for the Multi-National Security Transition Command - Iraq, whose mission, according to its Web site, is to assist the Iraqi government in developing, organizing, training, equipping and sustaining Iraq's security forces and ministries.

It does this through training programs for Iraqi personnel, such as

*(Continued on page 13)*

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## Computer Center Builds Skills, Networks for Palestinian Youth

By Grace Bradley  
Special Correspondent

**Hebron, West Bank** -- Palestinian girls wearing pressed headscarves and jeans stride beneath a grape arbor to enter a computer lab in downtown Hebron, where they sit beside boys at the keyboards. Clearly, this is no ordinary Internet cafe.

Some 60 Palestinian teenagers gather at this clubhouse nearly every day after school. It is one of six West Bank Internet learning centers run by Relief International Schools Online, with a grant from the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, to promote Internet exchanges between Palestinian and American youth. There are sister centers in Jenin, Ramallah, Salfeet and Bethlehem, and another opening soon in Nablus. More than 350 teachers and 3,000 students have participated in this innovative program.

Omar Dahman, information technology engineer for the Center of Excellence in Hebron, gives pointers on Web site design, writing code and Photoshop techniques while groups of students surf the Web for information and build networks of online friends with whom they develop community outreach projects.

Students at the center, who range in age from 14 to 22, are keen to connect to other Palestinian students in the West Bank who rarely are allowed to cross security barriers. Many of their online friends also come from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Britain, Egypt, Jordan, Tajikistan and the United States.

Hebron teens catch on quickly to American slang, and one 16-year-old said his new onscreen moniker will be "Ryan Hummer" -- just because it "sounds so awesome." Chatting with students in Virginia and Maryland has piqued his interest in volunteerism, and he recently joined a local environmental group, Youth for Change.



*Palestinian youth gather around a computer at the community-based Intel Computer Clubhouse center in Ramallah. The center is located near three refugee camps.*

Local teachers marvel at how quickly teenagers improve their skills through peer-teaching online with American students.

"Sometimes my students are better than me," laughed Ola Shower, a female instructor who ensures that girls feel free to participate as equals in a global civic education platform. "Every month, new people arrive, and we all have a chance to share our opinions and our talents."

This is one of the few places in Hebron that Arab parents feel comfortable sending boys and girls to learn together under staff supervision. "My father accepts that it's

the best way to improve my English and skills on the computer," said Diana Sharif, a veiled 17-year-old.

Gathering and comparing complex data and arriving at informed opinions are crucial skills that can be honed through information technology. Instructors encourage students to undertake individual projects on complex topics like climate change and the right to food. Lubna Taha, inspired in part by frank discussions with American girls on the cyber-network, devised an online workshop about the perils of early marriage for teenage wives.

"For me, it was the first time I had even considered this as an issue," admitted Nabeel Kasrawi, 17, a student actor who participated in her project. "I thought it was just the bad luck of some girls. Now, I get how early marriage isolates brides and I am against it."

With one in four Palestinians currently out of work here, young people are vulnerable to despair about their future, and sometimes fall prey to radical ideologies or violence. Hebron is a particularly volatile city -- part ghost town and part bustling downtown, flanked by jittery no-go zones separating Palestinians from right-wing Jewish settlers.

But frustration can be channeled into positive action, insisted Naser al-Ardah, Relief International's program officer for the Palestinian Territories. His aim is to empower women and youth through computer skills, and to use the Internet for vocational training, nonviolent action and conflict resolution.

*(Continued on page 12)*

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## New "Sunshine" Measure Supports Openness in U.S. Government . . .

(Continued from page 6)

curity-related information from public disclosure.

Another sponsor, Senator John Cornyn (Republican of Texas), said the law "holds politicians and bureaucrats accountable in an age of ever-expanding size and scope of government," and "strengthens our democracy by building on the ideals this nation was founded upon -- the people's fundamental right to know."

Laurie Babinski, an associate for the Baker Hostetler law firm in Washington, which lobbied the U.S. Congress to pass the measure, told America.gov that the new ombudsman's office, to be located in the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, will serve as a mediator between citizens and federal agencies regarding the release of information.

Babinski sees the ombudsman's office playing an important role in

cases where a federal agency either is moving too slowly in releasing records or has denied a FOIA request. The average citizen lacking the financial means to file a lawsuit for gaining access to records might now turn to the ombudsman's office for help, she indicated.

Rick Blum, coordinator of the Sunshine in Government Initiative, told America.gov he was "ecstatic" that President Bush signed the measure. Its passage, he said, is a "big win" for the public's need for transparency in government.

The Sunshine Initiative is a coalition of 10 media groups founded in 2005. It works to ensure that the federal government is accountable to its citizens.

The newspaper USA Today said in a July 2007 editorial that of the more than 500,000 freedom-of-information requests filed every year in the United States, more than 90 percent are from private citizens, businesses or state and

local agencies seeking information important to them, and which, in most cases, "they are entitled to."

The newspaper added that "federal agencies are supposed to respond to requests for information within 20 business days. In some cases, 20 years has been more like it."

More information ( <http://www.sunshineingovernment.org/> ) about the Sunshine in Government Initiative is on the group's Web site.

The full text ( <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/12/20071231-4.html> ) of the president's signing statement on FOIA is on the White House Web site.

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## Computer Center Builds Skills, Networks for Palestinian Youth . . .

(Continued from page 11)

"We should accept one another and our differences," commented Sharif, a student who sees computers as a way to sidestep confrontation. "Together we can achieve so much."

"Pride in results helps overcome a victim mentality," al-Ardah observed, "and real changes can come about through activism."

One group of Hebron students went online to recruit volunteers to refurbish the Qurtuba school for girls after vandals lobbed firebombs into the schoolyard in late November 2007 and hacked at the doors with axes. On the Internet, the teens selected sturdy blooms to replace the trampled flower beds, and planned to remove scorched rubble and boulders blocking the paths to the classrooms.

Abed Almu'ty Yaghmour, a young

computer club activist, sent an e-mail with an explanation of these renovation plans to a fellow student in Kabul, Afghanistan, using English, their only common language: "Peace is like a tree. If you take care of it, it will grow, but if you ignore it you will lose it."

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**Mechanics Training for Iraqi Army Fuels Engine for Change . . .**

*(Continued from page 10)*

the national police, paramedics and water patrol police.

The goal is to make them more capable of defeating terrorism while providing a stable environment for the evolution of representative government, individual freedom, the rule of law and a free-market economy.

At the same time Iraq's military continues to grow. In 2004, there were only 96,000 trained and equipped members of the Iraqi Security Force. That figure has risen to around 350,000 trained and equipped troops.

The result is that the military is undertaking more responsibility for the

nation's security. On June 1, 2007, responsibility for maintaining the security of Erbil, Dahuk and Sulaymaniyah provinces in northern Iraq officially transferred to the Kurdistan regional government.

As of January 2008, security in half of Iraq's 18 provinces will be controlled by the Iraqi government, with coalition forces positioned to provide assistance if needed.

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**Ties Between U.S. and Muslim Cities Grow . . .**

*(Continued from page 5)*

cational role with the general public and through our network and members about the Muslim world," Madden said.

Sister Cities International works in four areas: arts and culture, youth and education, humanitarian assistance, and sustainable economic development.

Baltimore's twin relationship with the Egyptian cities of Alexandria and Luxor reflects all four areas. To name a few instances, a Baltimore businessman visited Alexandria several years ago and saw an opportunity to build a factory that converts trash into the fuel ethanol. Preparations are being made for construction as soon as final funding is obtained. Physicians, nurses and medical technicians

from various Maryland universities, including Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland, have trained Egyptian counterparts in Alexandria and Luxor and hosted reciprocal visits from their counterparts. Baltimore has sent librarians on training missions, raised funds and collected books to support the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a modern library and cultural center that commemorates the ancient Library of Alexandria.

The core of the relationship between San Diego and Jalalabad, Afghanistan, is education. San Diego has built a school for students in elementary through high school in Jalalabad, supplied books and organized exchanges to train teachers and academics. The relationship also has led to a strong partnership between San Diego State University and Nangarhar

University to help re-establish higher education programs in areas such as English and engineering at Nangarhar. Houston, the unofficial oil capital of the United States, has formed sister-city relationships with Baku, Azerbaijan, and Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates, both oil producers.

As cities in the United States and Muslim countries reach out to form sister-city bonds, Oliver urges them to search out "similarities" that will allow them to knit together and build long-term relationships. "It is important that there are some similarities between the two communities -- population size, industries, geographical features, ports. If there is a dramatic difference in size or they are focused on different areas, it's hard to sustain a relationship," she said. ♦