



Weekly Special Report



Produced by the Public Affairs Section

INSIDE

International Partnerships Help To Fight Malaria in Africa

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- Malaria, the mosquito-borne disease that has killed close to a million people annually in Africa -- mainly children and pregnant women -- is being fought through international partnerships that emphasize African ownership in prevention and treatment strategies.



U.S. Malaria Coordinator Admiral Timothy Ziemer, right, tours the Regional Hospital in Thiès during visit to Senegal. Source: USAID

More than 90 percent of malaria victims live in Africa, where the disease has resulted in an estimated loss of \$12 billion a year from the continent's gross domestic product.

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United States Works To Promote Free Media as Pillar of Democracy

By Jane Morse
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- The United States is committed to promoting free media worldwide as one of the pillars of democracy. To mark World Press Freedom Day May 3, U.S. official Jonathan Farrar spoke with participants from around the world during a State Department-sponsored webchat.



Bangladeshi journalists protest against police officers who clashed with some press photographers during the second cricket test match between Bangladesh and Australia, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on April 17, 2006.

Farrar, the principal deputy assistant sec-

retary of state in the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, tapped his extensive experience in Latin America to discuss the U.S. government's active program in El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama to train journalists, government officials and civil society activists.

Since the program began nearly two years ago, he said,

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"We can now celebrate the success" of programs in 15 targeted African countries whose goal is to reduce malaria cases by 50 percent, Admiral Timothy Ziemer, coordinator of the President's Malaria Initiative (PMI), told a May 3 seminar at George Washington University.

The discussion, "Defeating Malaria in Africa: Building on Success through Partnership," was co-sponsored by the university's Elliott School of International Affairs and the David H. Miller Foundation.

Ziemer was appointed to head the PMI in June 2006. The health effort, launched by President Bush in June 2005, is a historic \$1.2 billion, five-year initiative headed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), in conjunction with several other health-related U.S. agencies, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"There's room to be optimistic" that malaria cases in Africa can be steadily reduced through a combination of treatments with advanced drugs like artemisinin and countermeasures like mosquito netting and indoor residual spraying of insecticides, Ziemer told the panel.

Six million people so far have been treated for malaria or have benefited from prevention outreach since PMI was established two years ago, and an additional 11 million will be reached in 2007, according to a PMI fact sheet.

Africans' willingness to be real partners in malaria eradication also has been encouraging, Ziemer added. This partnership is "consistent with the U.S. foreign assistance strategy

that looks for cooperative governments" that have a sustainable plan to address the health needs of their people, he said. "That's good community development and a good way of doing foreign assistance," he added.

many" battling the disease, Ziemer said Bush "also challenged the private sector to step up to the plate. And the good news is that there are many corporate, public-private organizations that are participating in this malaria fight."



Happy moms with bednets and malaria leaflets in Pemba, Mozambique. (USAID Photo)

The result has been the provision of significant funding from the United States, Ziemer pointed out. For example, in 1997 USAID's malaria programs in Africa totaled \$1 million. But for 2008 the USAID allocation is more than \$300 million, he said. "So PMI is a component of this government's commitment to community development and public health improvement in Africa," Ziemer said.

Adding that PMI considers itself "one of the partners in a field of

International corporations like the Coca-Cola Company could be especially useful in helping distribute bed nets as a preventative measure against the mosquitos that spread malaria, said Jerry Chambers, an international management affairs consultant and pharmaceutical engineer with longtime experience battling parasitic diseases in Africa.

"They have businesses all over the world," Chambers explained. Antimalaria programs could "piggyback"

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more than 500 journalists, government officials and nongovernmental organization (NGO) practitioners have been trained on journalism techniques, advocacy, freedom of information laws and the importance of a free and independent press.

U.S. EFFORTS IN LATIN AMERICA

In Honduras, the program enabled the creation of the first civil society coalition to promote national access to information legislation, he said. Legislation was approved in November of 2006, and a recent round table brought more than 142 journalists, civil society leaders and government officials together to discuss it. Three Honduran congressmen participated, discussing how the law can function as a tool to combat corruption.

In Nicaragua, the program trained journalists on media objectivity and supported the monitoring of media coverage of the presidential elections to measure bias.

In Panama, the program helped establish a Media Ethics Committee, one of only three in the region.

In El Salvador, the program continues to promote access to information and to strengthen journalism skills. A recent workshop on "Investigative Journalism in Cases of Corruption" trained more than 20 Salvadoran journalists on use of online resources, identification of sources, advantages associated with access to information laws and skills of investigative journalists.

U.S. SUPPORTS A FREE PRESS WORLDWIDE

Worldwide, Farrar said, the United States provides professional development for journalists through programs like the Edward Murrow Journalism Program, which brings promising journalists to the United States to meet government officials, business leaders and their professional colleagues in the United States.

An important component of this program, Farrar said, is that the visiting foreign journalists go to see all types of media outlets -- from small town papers in America's heartland to the large operations in New York and Los Angeles.

"My bureau provides over \$18 million to support press freedom in 20 countries," Farrar said. "These programs support initiatives like professional development in writing, editing and distributing news and opinion content, assistance with establishing community radio and training on establishing and maintaining Web sites."

Farrar said the Internet is an important venue for promoting press freedom, but its use has been under threat in a number of countries. To counter this threat, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched the Global Internet Freedom Task Force in 2006 to work with technology companies and NGOs to promote the free flow of information on the Internet.

"Freedom of the press is often called the First Freedom, and for good reasons," Farrar said. "Freedom of the press protects

freedom of thought and expression. A free press is indispensable to a vigorous debate and an informed electorate. A free press can hold government officials to account. "

But he added: "With freedom comes responsibility, of course, and journalists have a responsibility to be fair and accurate. Many of the programs of my bureau of the State Department are designed to help train journalists to meet these standards. When journalists speak the truth and are threatened as a result, our programs try to help ensure that they receive the protection of the rule of law. "

The Handbook of Independent Journalism (<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/journalism/index.htm>" target= "_blank ") offers a brief introduction to the fundamentals of journalism as it is practiced in democratic systems.

A Responsible Press Office (<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/pressoffice/>" target= "_blank "), written for government leaders and public information officials, offers advice on how to create an effective mechanism of communication between the press and the government.

For more information on U.S. policies, see Freedom of the Press (http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/democracy/rule_of_law/press_freedom.html).

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VOA Youth Radio Show by Burundi Teens Helps Refugees Transition

It is Saturday afternoon at a refugee reintegration camp in eastern Burundi and radios are tuned to the regular weekly broadcast of Ejo Bite (pronounced ed-joe bee-tay) or What About the Future?

The on-air voices sound young because the program's reporters are a group of teen journalists, ages 14-18, who are refugees displaced by the 1993 Burundi civil war.

During the 1990s, ethnic violence in Burundi forced more than half a million people to flee to refugee camps in Tanzania. Since peace officially was declared in 2006, thousands finally are returning home, facing the challenges of resettlement after a long absence.

Originally created in 2003 and funded by the Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration, Ejo Bite offered informal education via radio to refugee children and youth and provided a source of reliable news and information for young people. It has become one of the most popular shows on the Kirundi language service of the Voice of America (VOA), available in FM and shortwave formats, reaching many more people than just refugee youth in Africa's Great Lakes region.

The teens currently receiving journalism and technical training are located at two new resettlement camps in Burundi and at four camps in Tanzania.

The teens work closely with local coordinators to prepare their on-air

segments, which are assembled at the VOA studios in Washington. On any Thursday night, Ejo Bite's host, Auriane Ntahomvukiye, a native of Burundi and a student at the University of Maryland, can be found at the VOA studios recording her part of the show.



Ejo Bite host Auriane Ntahomvukiye is a native of Burundi and a student at the University of Maryland. (VOA photo)

Ntahomvukiye's family was in Burundi at the start of the civil war and moved to Tanzania for a few years before immigrating to the United States in 1996. She has been on the radio show since its

inception and says about Ejo Bite, "I feel that the refugees have been forgotten and that those who have lived through the upheaval [now] have a voice for their issues, including war, being forced to grow up fast and take adult roles, and learning to accept a life which they did not choose."

Each 30-minute show has two minutes of news. The next segment is an in-depth feature and can cover any subject that affects the refugees, such as food rationing or, now, the closing and consolidation of camps, and land issues for returnees.

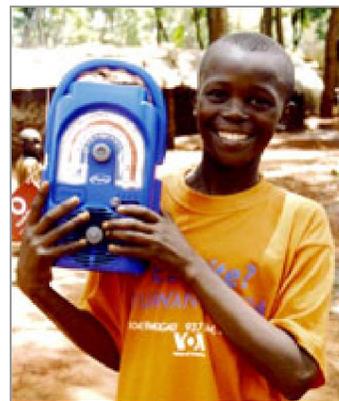
Seven minutes are devoted to a round table discussion between a youth panel and community leaders or politicians. A recent discussion on human rights explored the prob-

lem of returnee children who are physically abused by relatives and the need for government intervention to protect them.

The final segment is a radio drama - the most popular part of the show. Recent plays have covered the fear and nervousness about returning to Burundi, teen pregnancy and the subsequent ejection from school for girls, and another U.S. offer to bring 10,000 Burundian refugees to the United States.

One play depicted a teen who wanted to stop attending school since he expected to immigrate to the United States. It concluded that going to school was important, no matter the situation.

Ejo Bite has fostered a social community among refugee youth that was epitomized during February 2007, when more than 3,000



A young Burundi refugee in Tanzania listens to an Ejo Bite broadcast. (VOA photo)

young people attended a soccer tournament organized and promoted by the show's staff in an effort to create a sense of connection among returnees.

Many story ideas and the reporting come from the teens themselves -- "youth, by youth," as Ntahomvukiye says. The show has inspired Ntahomvukiye to study international

social action and community development, and, as she says, "to give back to the community in a passionate and professional way."

Ntahomvukiye visited Burundi in 2006 to organize a festival for

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African Partners Helping Plan Upcoming Trade Forum in Ghana

By Jim Fisher-Thompson
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- Planning for the upcoming African Growth and Opportunity Forum in Ghana includes input from African partners who believe the U.S.-originated trade program has the best chance to bring the continent into the world's economic mainstream.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield chaired a planning session April 30 at which more than a dozen African ambassadors contributed ideas on how the July 18-19 forum, to be held in Accra, can be most effective in bringing together business and trade officials from the United States and Africa.

Thomas-Greenfield told the gathering, which included Ghanaian Ambassador Kwame Bawuah-Edusei, whose nation will be hosting the forum, that Ghana has developed "a great [Internet] AGOA [African Growth and Opportunity Act] Web site" for the event with the forum agenda and related information.

The United States is working out how best to contribute to the 2007 forum theme: "As Trade Grows, Africa Prospers -- Optimizing the Benefits Under AGOA."

Representatives from the U.S. departments of Agriculture, Treasury and Commerce and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also attended the planning session. The agencies will host and co-host panels on topics such as: strategies for diversifying the manufacturing sector; health challenges to African productivity under AGOA; and U.S. and African government technical assistance programs.

Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns is slated to deliver the opening day luncheon speech on "Facilitating Agricultural Trade and Development Under AGOA."

The Ghana Forum will be the sixth such meeting since the AGOA trade legislation was passed by Congress in May 2000. It was reauthorized



Information technology can enhance the growth of Africa's clothing manufacturing industries, a key component of AGOA. (USAID photo)

and modified in 2002, 2004 and 2006. The law, which offers duty- and quota-free entry into the U.S. market for a range of goods from agricultural products to textiles, aims to boost the export and manufacturing sectors of African nations that seek to reform their economies along open-market lines.

When he signed the AGOA Acceleration Act of 2004, President Bush said, "AGOA nations are strengthening the rule of law. They are lowering trade barriers, they're combating corruption, and eliminating child labor."

In doing so, he said, these nations are "setting an important example for the entire continent, demonstrating that governments that re-

spect individual rights and encourage the development of their markets are more likely to grow economically and achieve political stability."

In December 2006, Liberia became the most recent nation to join the list of more than three dozen mostly sub-Saharan African nations that are eligible for AGOA's trade benefits.

Ghana's ambassador to the United States, Bawuah-Edusei, said much of the preliminary planning for the upcoming forum was been reviewed at the ministerial level during meetings by the African Union (AU) in January. Both AGOA and the forum, he added, are very important for Ghana's economic development.

"There is a lot of agreement on the [forum] program," Bawuah-Edusei said, especially its emphasis on the private sector as the engine of growth in Africa.

Besides its focus on business, the forum also will address civil society issues with presentations by a number of nongovernmental organizations.

Additional information (<http://www.agoa.gov.gh/>) about the July event is available on the forum's Web site.

For more information, see African Growth and Opportunity Act. (http://usinfo.state.gov/af/africa/trade_economic_development/agoa.html)

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Lubuto Libraries Provide Haven for AIDS Orphans, Street Children

By Louise Fenner
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- Children in Lusaka, Zambia, whose parents died of AIDS can find refuge from life on the streets in a special library where they read or listen to stories, learn about the wider world and improve their chances for an education.

The Lubuto Library Project was started by an American woman who believes that, in addition to food and shelter, every child deserves a chance to learn and to hope for a better future. Lubuto is a word in the Bemba language of Central Africa that means "enlightenment, knowledge and light," says Jane Kinney Meyers, the project's founder and president.

The project has taken shape as a Washington nonprofit organization that is collecting 5,000 high-quality children's books to be shipped to Lusaka and housed in a special library being built in the traditional Zambian architectural style. This first library, which will open later this year, will be the model for 100 more to be built in Zambia and other African countries.

The next two Lubuto libraries are scheduled to be built in the rural communities of Nabukuyu and Itimpi. Each library will have a complete collection of children's books in new or excellent condition, said Meyers, because "we want the children we serve to know that we respect them and feel they are worthy of good, new books."

Meyers, an American librarian who spent many years in Africa, notes that for reasons ranging from lack of money to prejudice, children orphaned by AIDS, as well as other street kids, often are unable to at-

tend school. The Lubuto Library will provide them "an opportunity to learn," to improve their literacy and even to study for secondary school entrance exams.

library, kids are now in secondary school." Motivated youngsters were coming to the library and studying for school entrance exams. "The tests ask a lot of questions



Fountain of Hope staffers are being trained to classify books for the new Lubuto Library. (Courtesy Lubuto Library Project)

In 2001 Meyers visited the Fountain of Hope drop-in center for street children in Lusaka and began reading aloud to the kids. There was an overwhelming response, she said; she would spend one or two hours reading to the children and "they still were begging for more." In 2002 Meyers and the Fountain of Hope staff started a small library in a shipping container, and children lined up to get in.

Meyers, interviewed in Washington, recounted how, a year after her return to the United States, she "began to hear that because of that

about things around the world, such as who is the president of the United States, and the kids were able to learn" by reading, she said. "Now those kids are grown up, and they have all finished high school."

Kenneth Hou, who used to visit the library in the shipping container, now works for the Fountain of Hope. He wants to work in the new Lubuto Library when it opens. Another young visitor to the shipping-container library, Humphrey Mulenga, graduated from high school, has a successful career and is doing outreach for AIDS preven-

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tion groups.

The Lubuto Library Project works with the Zambian Library Associations as well as the ministries of education and child development. U.S. donations come from individuals, libraries, book publishers, the National Geographic Society and other donors.

Students from several secondary schools in the Washington area have conducted book drives, and each Sunday afternoon students go to the church where the books are being stored to help classify them and prepare them for shipment to Zambia. "We are trying to raise awareness among young people here how HIV/AIDS has affected other young people," Meyer said.

Daughter Penelope, 17, and son Henry, 14, are involved in the project. Penelope said she learned of the plight of AIDS orphans and other street kids during her years in Zambia with her family. "But I have

friends who haven't ever been to Africa who are able to understand the importance of this and have been eager to get involved," she said.

In November 2006 a documentary on the project, narrated by U.S. civil rights leader Julian Bond, premiered at an event hosted by the U.S. Embassy in Lusaka. The Lubuto Library Project "reflects the standards of library services for children in the United States, as well as the American tradition of free access to information and learning," said U.S. Ambassador Carmen Martinez. "Likewise, beginning here in Zambia, Lubuto libraries will provide an opening into the world, making available education, information" and hope for children who need it most, she added.

The traditional thatched buildings planned to house the Lubuto libraries will have sunken sitting areas in their centers for reading or storytelling as well as smaller reading areas around their perimeters. The beauty of the building tells street children

that somebody cares about them, Meyers said.

Children will be encouraged to write down stories in their native languages. And, with most of the donated books in English, Meyers said she is eager to find more books in local languages.

Meyers said it is critical that the Lubuto libraries are beautiful, welcoming and respectful of local tradition "because the children we're serving have for the most part been cut off completely from their culture. In a society where your identity is so closely tied up with your family and your relationships to your people, it's a profound trauma not to have [those] connection[s]."

"We want these libraries to be the place where society reaches back and pulls them back in," she said.

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on their vast distribution networks, which reach into the countryside.

Dr. Mark Grabowsky, an officer with the U.S. Public Health Service currently on detail as malaria coordinator for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, told the panel that global malaria programs now are focusing on increased consultations with host nations.

"It used to be that we people in

international health would sit in places like Washington" and dictate anti-malaria strategies to host countries," Grabowsky said. But now, he said, the emphasis is on "partnerships that harness U.S. resources to help African countries meet their national [health] goals."

While this is a challenging way to fight disease, Grabowsky said, the advantage is that "it guarantees country ownership of these activities," which in the long run will make anti-malaria efforts more sustainable.

More information (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/malaria/>) on the President's Malaria Initiative is available on the White House Web site.

For more information on U.S. policies, see Health (http://usinfo.state.gov/global_issues/health.html) and U.S. Aid to Africa (http://usinfo.state.gov/af/africa/aid_to_africa.html).

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Tanzania's Maasai Women Receive Golden Opportunity To Learn

Everyone remembers their first day of school. Whether it's the thrill of heading out the door for the first time with the older children or the fear of meeting the teacher, the memory lingers.

With support from MWEDO, a local Tanzanian Maasai women's organization, the U.S. Agency for International Development's E-LEAP program has introduced school to 180 Maasai women learners, many of whom are older than 40, for the first time in their lives.

Merikinoi Ngeressa is a 55-year-old Maasai woman who lives in Longido District in northern Tanzania. Like many of her classmates, Ngeressa is a widow. She is also responsible for her six children, as well as five grandchildren. She earns her living by making and selling beaded jewelry and marketing eggs.

During her youth, Ngeressa recalls, attending school was an option reserved only for boys. Because of this custom, neither she nor her sisters received any formal education. Growing up in a society with this custom, to which her father adhered, Ngeressa has been determined that all her children attend school. She continues to work hard with that goal in mind.

During E-LEAP classes, women learn to read and write in Kiswahili, the national language of Tanzania. This is an adjustment for a woman who has spoken only Maa, the lan-

guage of the Maasai, most of her life.

Nevertheless, Ngeressa sees the value of learning the language spoken by the majority of Tanzanians, particularly for commercial pur-



Merikinoi Ngeressa proudly shows off her

poses. Classroom material also integrates reading and counting with instruction about ways to improve maternal health, agriculture, business and homebuilding.

Asked about her motivation for learning, Ngeressa responds frankly: "I was tired of depending on other people to read or count money for me. I wanted to be free."

In order to gain that sense of freedom, many of the women enrolled in E-LEAP walk four miles or more, three times a week, to attend classes.

Many believe that learning instills pride and self-confidence. This theory was proved true when Ngeressa eagerly showed off her lesson book adorned with scribbled words and a picture of a Boma, a mud and thatch home typical of Maasai culture.

Ngeressa began her educational journey in November 2006. Reflecting that she is almost halfway through her year of learning, she knows that many less fortunate

Maasai women would like to be in her place. Limited funding has forced organizers to fend off an overflow capacity of would-be learners.

Perhaps most surprisingly, this initiative, designed to encourage greater gender awareness among a group of people known for their strong adherence to custom, has resonated among men, many of whom have appeared at the classroom door, asking to be included.

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

VOA Youth Radio Show by Burundi Teens . . .

street children. While it was not a VOA project, she felt her work was an extension of the commitment she and her teen colleagues feel toward the refugee community.

She says that the teens of Ejo Bite are "very dedicated and are proud to use their positions to influence other young people in a way that no other, older reporters can. We have a unique show which provides news and entertainment for young, displaced refugees and reflects their experiences. It is a platform for their issues -- a platform of hope."

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

Mothers Measure Their Children's Growth and Gain Confidence

"The children get vaccinations, and we get lots of health information that we can talk about together," says Maymuna, mother of three.

Traveling 25 kilometers in the mid-day heat, Maymuna and her three children arrive at the Gamaadji health clinic in northern Senegal, where dozens of mothers and their children eagerly await their turn to be weighed and vaccinated. Maymuna has learned from the other mothers that the benefits of participating in Counterpart International's maternal and child health program are worth the hot, tiresome walk.

Maymuna points to her information card, on which Doctor Amadou Keita has charted her children's growth rates as well as all of her children's vaccinations. "Before, the children got vaccinated at birth and sometimes after six months. Now they are always up to date," she beams.

The program, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), organizes the traveling medical team, which consists of two nurses and one doctor, and

selects a community health worker from each village to assist. Families whose children are found to be malnourished are given rations of wheat-soy blend, grains and cooking oil, and they also receive nutritional advice.



"Everybody always ate, but now they eat better. The rations augment what they already had," says Keita, who explains that positive reinforcement for mothers who are achieving their child's height and weight goals goes a long way.

"Mothers are more confident and comfortable with the health of their kids when they can see it charted on the cards. The proof is they keep coming back for checkups," the doctor adds.

Maymuna finds that her youngest is charted in the yellow area. Rather than finding it upsetting news, she is pleased that she found out early and can take measures to prevent further problems. She chats with the nurse and other mothers and measures her portion of grains into a USAID-labeled cooking oil tin to take home, ready to help her child maintain a healthier weight and height.

Carefully resting the tin on a brightly colored cloth and balancing it on her head, Maymuna gathers her children and begins the long walk home, glowing in the knowledge that she is surrounded by such a warm, health-conscious community supporting her as she cares for her family.

(Adapted from an article published by Counterpart International/Senegal.)

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

U.S. Government Presence Grows in Second Life Online World

By Cheryl Pellerin
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington – Since early 2007, more than 6 million virtual residents of the online world called Second Life have had new neighbors – a handful of U.S. government agencies that are exploring possibilities for education, collaboration and outreach in the popular real-time multiverse.

Agencies that have facilities of varying complexity and interaction in Second Life include the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), NASA, the National Institutes of Health and its National Library of Medicine (NLM), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. House of Representatives.

The Department of Homeland Security, the National Science Foundation and many other

U.S. agencies also have representatives in this virtual world who attend regular “in-world” meetings of government representatives to discuss Second Life and how best to work with its features.

With virtual residents from more than 100 real-life countries, Second Life is a good place to reach people with a range of messages – about health, science, disaster preparedness, education, current issues and more.

“Second Life provides a new medium, a new ability to communicate

with citizens and customers,” said NOAA information technology specialist Eric Hackathorn during a May 4 interview at the NOAA facility in Second Life.

In Second Life, Hackathorn said, “people have the ability to communicate directly with NOAA in a two-



way conversation ... behind the corporate firewall. To me, it's the price of doing business in the 21st century.”

LIVING SECOND LIFE

Second Life opened in 2003, created by Linden Lab, a San Francisco-based company founded in 1999 by Philip Rosedale, to create a new form of shared experience.

Its residents own and build the world's digital infrastructure, including homes, vehicles, nightclubs, stores, landscapes, clothing,

games, islands, schools, companies, government organizations, libraries and more.

Anyone can sign up for a free membership by registering with Second Life and creating an avatar – a member's persona in the virtual world. This virtual world, says Linden Lab, teems with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity.

It even has an economy based on Linden dollars – about 265 Lindens to the U.S. dollar. Millions of Linden dollars change hands every month for resident-created goods and services, and can be bought and sold on LindeX, Second Life's official Linden dollar exchange.

VIRTUAL GOVERNMENT

Of all the U.S. government agencies in Second Life, NOAA has the most complex facility so far. On its own island, called Meteora, visitors can experience a hurricane on the wing of a research aircraft, rise through the atmosphere clinging to a weather balloon, stand on a beach during a tsunami, or ride underwater on a NOAA submersible.

NOAA's Earth System Research Laboratory developed the site by holding a competition among Second Life design companies and letting Second Life residents help choose the winner.

“Right now we have an island that has a smattering of NOAA's research,” Hackathorn said, “but NOAA does so much more. Incorporating those activities will take a

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Protecting Refugees a National Obligation, State Official Says

By David Anthony Denny
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington – The United States, in keeping with a national government's responsibility to protect refugees within its territory, has a strong asylum system and strives to help other nations develop similar systems, according to a State Department official.

Kelly Ryan, a deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of Population, Refugee and Migration Affairs, told the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) May 4 that the United States has "a very robust asylum system with many review levels. I think it's the best in the world."

The United States talks to other countries about their asylum systems and has worked with the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) doing joint training programs with Mexico and Central America, she said. The United States also has advised various countries on the development of their asylum laws and has a very good relationship with many countries that are just beginning to have a formalized asylum system, Ryan said.

"We've had one [an asylum system] in place for quite some time, and we've had experiences where we've been successful, and we've had experiences where we needed to change a certain procedure because we were getting an outcome we weren't entirely satisfied with," she said.

Ryan, during her 10 years at the Department of Justice handling the application of asylum law in the United States, worked very closely with UNHCR. That organization gives the United States supervisory

advice on its obligations under international conventions, particularly the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol.

According to Ryan, UNHCR mobilizes national governments to help and protect refugees, but "there are rogue states throughout the world that are unwilling or unable to help refugees," she said.

"UNHCR is there, as is the United States, trying to make sure that refugees are protected from physical or mental harm, from forced return, and from being disadvantaged by their status," she said.

In promoting international protection of refugees, the United States believes UNHCR performs a very valuable function, Ryan said.

"There are places in the world where the United States is not welcomed, liked or influential," she said, and in those places UNHCR can be a particularly effective advocate for refugee protection. There are also places where the United States is more effective than UNHCR. In those places, the United States shares its information with UNHCR and works collegially. On other occasions the two entities can accomplish more together than if they worked separately, Ryan said.

Ryan described the overall relationship between the U.S. government and UNHCR as "very respectful," and said the agency was also "very responsive" to U.S. requests. However, Ryan said, on occasion UNHCR has disagreed with positions taken by the U.S. government and has filed amicus curiae [friend of the court] briefs with the U.S. Supreme Court when U.S. government policies faced legal chal-

lenges. Such filings, submitted by parties not directly involved in the litigation, offer additional information the court might wish to consider in reaching its decision.

Ryan said the United States is UNHCR's largest bilateral donor and works with UNHCR throughout the year to talk about priorities for the United States. In addition, the United States is assisting UNHCR in voluntary refugee returns in southern Sudan, Afghanistan and Liberia, "where people are finally able to return home and begin their new lives," she said.

The United States also is helping UNHCR continue its work in Sudan's Darfur region and in Chad, and is cooperating with the U.N. agency on the humanitarian corridors created in Lebanon to permit access by the International Committee of the Red Cross and those providing humanitarian aid to victims of the conflict. The United States has worked on local integration, though this is not greatly welcomed by some states. Ryan said a recent example of refugee resettlement and local integration efforts coming together occurred with Burmese refugees in Thailand.

John Bolton, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and now an AEI senior fellow, also said national governments are accountable for refugees. The fact that many governments leave deciding who qualifies as a refugee to UNHCR constitutes "ducking the hard political choices," he said.

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Pocahontas Played Mythic Role in Founding of Jamestown

By Stephen Kaufman
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington -- Who was the real Pocahontas?

One of the most famous stories connected with the founding of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America, portrays Pocahontas, daughter of Powhatan chief Wahunsunacock, heroically saving English colonial leader John Smith from being clubbed to death in 1607. The story was featured in the Disney's 1995 animated film, *Pocahontas*, and Terrence Malick's *The New World* that was released 10 years later. Both films suggested a romantic relationship between the two.

But some scholars dispute the historical accuracy of the event, based entirely on Smith's own writings 17 years after it supposedly occurred. Some argue Smith had misinterpreted a Powhatan adoption ritual; others say the clubbing incident might not have happened because Smith never mentioned it in any of his contemporary journals, but invented or embellished the story years later, after Pocahontas had married English settler John Rolfe and converted to Christianity.

The name "Pocahontas" was actually a nickname for Wahunsunacock's daughter Matoaka, who would have been only 10 or 11 years old at the time Jamestown was established. After being captured and held by the English in 1613, she adopted Christianity, married Rolfe and changed her

name to Rebecca. En route to Virginia in 1617 after visiting England, she died and was buried at the town of Gravesend, England. In addition to a romanticized legacy, due mainly to Smith's writings, she

ute to her role as an ambassador between her tribe and the early English settlers.

For more information about Jamestown and its indigenous peoples,



This image provided by the Library of Congress shows Pocahontas saving the life of Captain John Smith. (AP Images)

also left a son, Thomas Rolfe, from whom many Virginians claim to be descended, including President Woodrow Wilson's second wife, Edith Bolling Galt, and Arctic explorer Admiral Richard Byrd.

In 2006, a delegation of Virginia's eight remaining tribes -- the Chickahominy, Eastern Chickahominy, Mattaponi, Monacan Indian Nation, Nansemond, Pamunkey, Rappahannock and Upper Mattaponi -- visited Pocahontas' grave site in Gravesend, England. There, they paid trib-

see related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/xarchives/display.html?p=washfile-english&y=2007&m=May&x=20070504163351esnamfuak0.713833>).

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Rice Urges All Nations To Assume Responsibilities Toward Iraq

By David Shelby
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington – Not only do all nations have an interest in ensuring that Iraq emerges as a peaceful, stable, democratic country, but nations also have an obligation to work toward that end, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said at the Iraq Neighbors' Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, May 4.

"This is a significant time in the region and for the international community because if Iraq fails to achieve these goals of stability and democracy, we will all pay," Rice told the conference delegates.

However, self-interest should not be the sole motivation for supporting Iraq, Rice added. "[W]e're also here because we remember that when there are times of need by countries in the international system, it is the obligation and the responsibility of the international system to step up and to help," she said.

Rice challenged the Iraqi government, Iraq's neighbors and all members of the international community to assume their responsibilities.

The Iraqi government, she said, must move forward urgently with the projects of national reconciliation. These include adopting a national oil law, holding a fresh round of provincial elections, reviewing the constitution, dismantling militias, improving budget execution and reviewing methods to deal with former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party.

"It is quite clear that Iraq needs a process of national reconciliation," she said. "It needs a successful and urgent process to bring all Iraqis

into the belief that Iraq will be an Iraq for all Iraqis."

Rice told Iraq's neighbors that they must work to ensure their borders do not serve as transit points for terrorists and arms headed into Iraq. She urged them to assist Iraq with economic development and energy supplies and called on them to refrain from interfering in Iraq's internal affairs.



Delegates attend the Iraq Neighbors' Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, May 4. (AP Images)

Rice said the international community should provide Iraq relief from its Saddam-era debt and help train Iraq's security forces and civil servants.

She also called on the conference participants to form active working groups focused on border security, refugees and energy supplies. This idea originally emerged from the first neighbors' conference in Baghdad in March, but the groups have yet to take up their work.

"If we simply sit here only to meet again with nothing having happened between the time that we meet here in Sharm el-Sheikh and the next time that we meet, then the world will rightly judge us badly for

not having taken action on those things that need to be done," she said.

Rice said the United States would continue to help secure and rebuild Iraq, and she expressed hope that the support demonstrated at the conference would inspire the Iraqi people in their efforts to re-establish stability.

"I hope that the Iraqi people recognize the extraordinary nature of this gathering and the degree to which the international community supports them in their struggle against terrorism and extremism and in their efforts to form a democratic basis for their political life," she told journalists after the conference.

A transcript (<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2007/may/84293.htm>) of Rice's remarks to reporters is available on the State Department Web site.

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Democracy and Islam Focus of Young Arab Leaders

By Lea Terhune
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington – Obaida Fares from Syria and Lubna Selaibeekh from Bahrain agree that a healthy democracy could solve many problems in their home countries. “Many people think that there is no relation between Islam and democracy and we have to choose between Islam and democracy. Our argument is there is not contradiction between Islam and democracy; we can be Muslims and at the same time we can be democrats,” Fares told USINFO.

Fares and Selaibeekh are completing a four-month stint as Leaders for Democracy fellows, the first such group sponsored by the U.S State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). At the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University in New York state, participants attended a month of lectures and workshops on public administration, transition to democracy and related themes before serving internships at organizations related to their fields.

Fares, office director for the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), also is an intern at the National Endowment for Democracy, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that states its mission is to promote democracy that “need not be based upon the model of the United States” but “evolves according to the needs and traditions of diverse political cultures.”

Selaibeekh, an educator, works for Bahrain’s Department of Curriculum. She is an intern at Street Law Inc., which offers practical, interactive educational programs about law, democracy and human rights. She is enthusiastic about Street Law’s approach, which includes

mock trials where students learn by direct experience how the justice system works. She said she sees much she would like to implement in Bahrain. “I’m advocating for more active learning in our curriculum, and although that’s the goal, still we find it difficult in terms of resources to actually write such curriculum.” Street Law’s experienced

Fares’ employer, CSID, works with about 1000 democracy activists throughout the Arab world “to fill the gap between the Islamists and secularists,” he said. CSID organizes workshops and conferences on Islam and democracy in Arab countries, with good results. “We got very high participation from both the sides, Islamist and secular,”



Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice welcomes Leaders for Democracy Fellows from the Middle East and North Africa to the State Department. After a week in Washington, the Fellows will attend a month long academic program at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University before serving internships in organizations related to their areas of interest. (State Dept.)

staff members can provide good guidance, she told USINFO.

Contacts made in the United States are future resources. MEPI participants also learn from and network with each other -- 22 fellows from Middle Eastern countries. “I’ve learned from this experience about the Arab world more than I’ve learned in my life,” Selaibeekh said. She had just come from a panel discussion on human rights in Saudi Arabia. The insight gained from colleagues and from Middle Eastern ambassadors, ministers, experts and American legislators speak is invaluable, Fares and Selaibeekh concurred.

with a “high level of debate between both of them.” In the end, he said, “most felt they got something useful.” The key is promoting mutual respect, according to Fares.

“We have to include each element of society. I think one of our problems in the Arab world -- even when we talk about activists or NGOs -- the secularists refuse to work with the Islamists or involve them in the political life and the Islamists do the same thing. We have to have tolerance, political tolerance in our societies,” Fares said, adding, “You have to find the common ground.”

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Democracy and Islam Focus of Young Arab Leaders . . .

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Fares and Selaibeekh also are learning more about Americans. "I think Hollywood is not doing you any good," Selaibeekh says, because stereotypes perpetuated by the entertainment industry work against understanding. "Mostly, the Islamist Muslims always feel there's not much to learn from the Americans," thinking "they don't have any values or morals ... they don't have anything to offer," she said. "I have to struggle with people I know to say 'No, that's not true.'" Many Westerners "have very strong values," she said. Selaibeekh said she

feels American values were shaped by history: "You escaped from certain oppression in Europe, and so freedom of expression and governance is at the core of this nation."

That goes two ways, Fares said. He would like American society to understand Arabs better, "our needs and our culture ... at the same time we have to make efforts to understand the American psyche." He said the MEPI program is "giving us the chance to take these values to our society and help the people to understand them more and to try to explain ourselves to the American people."

They both said they want to integrate democracy into their home countries. Fares said he feels the people of Syria "are looking to change their situation." Selaibeekh said Bahrain is changing since the king introduced reforms in 1999. "I think it has to be gradual," she said, "or else, easy come, easy go."

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U.S. Government Presence Grows in Second Life Online World . . .

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heck of a lot more land. Ultimately, I'd like to see a NOAA continent."

Not far from Meteora is Health Info Island, a medical library and virtual hospital initially funded with a \$40,000 National Library of Medicine (NLM) grant to a group called Library Alliance in Illinois to provide consumer health information services in virtual worlds.

There are three buildings on the island, said NLM technical information specialist Laura Bartlett, a consumer health library, a medical library and a health and wellness center. Over time, the project will provide training programs, outreach to virtual medical communities, consumer health resources and one-on-one support to Second Life residents.

EDUCATION AND OUTREACH

Another NLM division, the Office of Outreach and Special Populations in

the Division of Specialized Information Services, is exploring Second Life as a way to improve access to high-quality, accurate health information in underserved and special populations.

"Second Life and many [similar] tools are becoming very popular," said Victor Cid, senior computer scientist in the Office of Outreach and Special Populations, "and we believe it is very important to start exploring these tools as means to disseminate information, reach people and collaborate."

Some government agencies, like CDC, have basic facilities so far that offer two-dimensional information and little interactivity. Others, like the Department of Homeland Security, do not yet have permanent spaces in Second Life but are making use of the digital world.

Jean-Paul Boucher is a contractor with SRA International Inc., a company doing several Second Life projects for government agencies. His

avatar wears a shirt with a Homeland Security logo.

Homeland Security, he said, "is holding a virtual conference the first week in June in the auditorium on NOAA's island for first responders and academics from around the United States." Such collaboration, Boucher added, is one of the great values of Second Life.

"It's a tremendously powerful tool set that eliminates the time and space boundaries that normally hold people back from collaborating with each other," he said. "We see that as another primary focus for the government."

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Threats Increasing to Free Speech on the Internet

By Judy Aita
USINFO United Nations Correspondent

United Nations -- The Internet is a key component of press freedom in the 21st century, yet Internet journalists and bloggers increasingly are coming under attack by repressive regimes trying to block the free flow of information and expression, say journalists and activists.

"Free thought, particularly expressed on the Internet is becoming more and more dangerous," says Bridget Johnson, Los Angeles Daily News columnist and blogger. "The Committee to Protect Journalists has been tracking the detention of Internet writers since 1997 and the 2006 figure is the highest the group has ever recorded. Now, one in three jailed journalists is a blogger, online editor, or Web-based reporter." According to CPJ, 134 journalists were jailed in 2006; of that number, 49 worked on the Internet.

U.S. efforts to promote the free flow of information range from monitoring Internet access in countries around the world and including the data in the annual State Department Country Reports on Human Rights to financing Internet projects in developing countries. Since 2004, the United States has given \$250 million to projects that include assisting with Web site design, providing computers and training technicians to keep systems operating.

Johnson and other bloggers and activists discussed the growing challenges to free speech on the Internet at a World Press Freedom Day panel May 3 entitled "The Citizen Journalist: The Internet as a Tool for Freedom of Speech." The

panel was hosted by the U.S. Mission to the United Nations and included bloggers from countries with press restrictions and representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).



The press fosters debate, provides a forum for expressing different points of view and keeps governments accountable for the decisions they make, said Jeffrey Krilla, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor. "The increasing challenges the press face around the world are challenges to democracy and freedom."

One of the great opportunities for spreading freedom of expression is the Internet, Krilla said. "The Internet holds enormous promise particularly for the developing world and efforts to blunt the Internet's transformational power need to be countered by governments, NGOs, and by citizens worldwide."

Tala Dowlatshahi, New York director of the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders, said that the ongoing debate among some media representatives and lawmakers over

whether bloggers are journalists and to what freedoms bloggers are entitled "is a waste of time."

"It is high time we set aside the blogger-versus-journalist polemic and acknowledge that they are there fighting side-by-side in many countries to defend freedom of expression," she said.

"In legal terms, a media professional is not entitled to better protection than a blogger," Dowlatshahi said. "Freedom of expression, at least in theory, is something everyone is entitled to regardless of their status. Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights underscores this basic principle."

INTERNET FREEDOM AND REPRESSIVE REGIMES

The Internet has caused major upheavals in countries that do not permit freedom of expression, Dowlatshahi said. Bloggers can be pivotal in repressive environments where the media live in constant fear of the political leadership. In Egypt, she pointed out, it was a blogger who revealed that torture was being carried out in detention centers.

China is the worst place for cyberdissidents, but other countries -- including Vietnam, Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Iran -- are not far behind, Dowlatshahi said.

Watson Meng, founder of Boxun News, and Drexel University marketing professor Frank Xie, a blogger on Boxun News, talked about the problems facing Chinese bloggers.

In China, citizen journalists are important, said Meng. Official informa-

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Speakers at Conference Urge Gender Equality in Muslim World

By Ralph Dannheisser
USINFO Special Correspondent

Washington -- Women took center stage at the 8th annual conference of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy (CSID), presenting their views on women's rights in Islam and Muslim societies.

Most of the audience at the April 27 conference was made up of women; almost all of the panelists at the daylong session and all but one of the moderators were women.

Presenters ranged from a University of Richmond law professor who quoted extensively from the Quran to back her contention that the Muslim holy book supports gender equality, to a pair of Canadians who told of their own experience in engaging minority Muslim women in the political process in that democratic nation. Other participants came from Great Britain, Iran and the Philippines.

The targeted focus on one issue was a departure for CSID, a Washington-based nonprofit advocacy group whose past annual conferences have addressed the broader concept of the compatibility between Islam and democracy.

Opening the conference, CSID President Radwan Masmoudi cited what he termed substantial misunderstanding over the issue of women's rights in Islam, "both in the Muslim world and in the West." Going back to the roots of the religion, he said the Prophet Muhammad, in his farewell speech, emphasized the rights of women and urged all Muslims to ensure they had equality with men.

But Masmoudi acknowledged that,

"while Islam gave rights to women that were revolutionary 1400 years ago, compared with other religions and civilizations, ...unfortunately that status was not always maintained." Now, he said, "If anything, we are unfortunately behind."

As women are the ones responsible for raising and educating children, he said, "they determine the future of the Muslim society," making their treatment as full partners vital to the future of the Muslim world.

Masmoudi took favorable note of the emergence of an Islamic feminist movement -- one that he said is still young but strong and growing quickly. "Women must take the lead in this effort [to secure equality]. ... Rights are never given, they are always taken. ... Nobody is going to come and give you your rights on a silver platter," he declared.

In an interview between sessions, Masmoudi said the conference amounted to one front in "a battle of ideas for what Islam means in the 21st century," countering "the opinions of the extremists who say that democracy and women's rights are un-Islamic."

"We need to show that they are not only compatible with Islam, they are required by Islam. This is what Islam demands," he said.

Erica Barks-Ruggles, the U.S. State Department's deputy assistant secretary for democracy, human rights and labor, said in conference opening remarks that as she has traveled

throughout the Middle East, she has been "very impressed by the strength, the intelligence, the education and the determination of women ... to play a strong role in ... the future of their societies."



Radwan Masmoudi
CSID President

"Their voices are increasingly being heard," Barks-Ruggles said, adding, "Sometimes we forget how much has changed in the last several years" in the region. In terms of participation in the political process, she cited advances -- in voting, election to office, or both -- in the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Morocco

and Jordan, and even in Iran. There, she said, some women now serve in the parliament, and others have been "demonstrating actively for the last several years" despite government crackdowns and jailings.

Recalling meetings in Jordan in 2006, Barks-Ruggles said she found it "enormously impressive what these women were doing ... to build the skills of women in their communities and give the opportunity for women and girls to fully participate in the lives of their families, in their communities, and in their society at large."

Like Masmoudi, Barks-Ruggles stressed that successful efforts to expand women's rights must be "driven from within, for the community, from the community," with outside institutions playing only a supporting role.

"We in the U.S. government ...

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Speakers at Conference Urge Gender Equality in Muslim World . . .

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want to work in partnership with those governments, civil society, the business community, and everyday citizens ... as they are working to build societies that respect the rights of all their citizens and build opportunity for all their citizens," she said. "We want to do this in a manner that is respectful of the sensibilities and diverse cultures ... and we want to do this while also focusing on the fundamental core rights" enumerated in the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- rights in the areas of free speech, assembly, privacy, worship and equality before the law.

"As a woman, I am very pleased that my sisters in the region are working hard as they try to figure out how to assert themselves" and enhance their rights "in a way that's respectful within their own

societies," Barks-Ruggles said.

At a dinner session, Masmoudi presented his group's "Muslim Democrat of the Year" award to Amina Rasul-Bernardo, founder and president of the Philippine Council for Islam and Democracy -- a group modeled on CSID. She was the first woman to receive the annual award.

Rasul-Bernardo observed that "most of you may see us Southeast Asians as living in the periphery, far from the heartland" -- even though they actually constitute the largest number of Muslims in the world.

But, she suggested, the fact that Muslim women in her region "enjoy liberties denied many of our sisters in the Middle East" could provide a model for that "heartland."

"In most communities, women have

been silenced, and I think it is time ... for us to come out of the silent mode and join hands with our brothers ... who speak out for what we know to be true in our faith, who speak out for the need to democratize our communities," she said.

The specifics of that democracy must be developed within Muslim society, she stressed, declaring, "Democracy has got to be home-grown, it has got to be nurtured, it cannot be imposed on a people."

For more information on U.S. policies, see Women in the Global Community (http://usinfo.state.gov/dhr/human_rights/women.html).

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Threats Increasing to Free Speech on the Internet . . .

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tion is not reliable and people are looking for good Web sites with reliable information. Since Boxun was founded in 2000, it has been the Number 1 online Chinese news service.

Governments (including that of China), NGOs, journalists and ordinary citizens make up the audience for the Boxun Web site, which contains news and 1,400 blogs. But, Meng said, his big problem is "the great firewall" the Chinese government uses to block his site.

Xie added that China uses the best technology for its firewall and is exporting it free to Cuba, North Korea and Sudan.

There are about 137 million Internet users in China (10.5 percent of the population), according to Xie. One of the problems is the cost of Internet access, he said. Xie predicted that if the cost of access were reduced, the number of Internet users in China would surpass the 210 million people in the United States who now use the Internet.

Bloggers "need international support at this moment, on International Press Freedom Day," said Nora Younis, an Egyptian blogger and activist. "We need the international support of other bloggers, scholars, journalists, intellectuals and civil society."

With an estimated 8 million Internet

users in Egypt, blogging has become an increasingly important means of expression for a country with a young population. Nevertheless, Younis said, new government restrictions are forcing young bloggers to censor their own writings -- which they never had to do before -- or quit altogether.

Echoing the sentiments of the other panelists, Younis said, "We as young people do not want to go to prison. We want to write, we want to engage."

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

Despite Questions, Polio Eradication Is Feasible, U.S. Officials Say

By Cheryl Pellerin
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington – Nineteen years and \$4.6 billion into a global campaign to eradicate the poliomyelitis (polio) virus that paralyzes and often kills children younger than age 5, a debate has begun about whether it will be possible to rid the world of this infectious disease.

The answer, according to officials of the U.S. State Department, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is that polio eradication is feasible and it is imperative.

“The advancement of greater public health worldwide is a foreign policy priority for the Bush administration,” said Paula Dobriansky, under secretary of state for democracy and global affairs, at a May 1 panel discussion hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), “and working to prevent disease when possible and treat it when necessary is a moral imperative.”

Since 1988, the U.S. contribution has been \$1.2 billion, or 28 percent of the total external funding for polio eradication.

“One very hopeful piece of information is that we have already eradicated one of the [three] types of polio,” said CDC Director Julie Gerberding, M.D. “Type 2 is no longer being transmitted in the wild, and it’s an important signal. If it’s possible to eliminate one, it is likely we can do that with the other two.”

CHILDREN UNDER AGE 5 ARE MOST AFFECTED

Polio mainly affects children under age 5. Poliovirus enters the body through the mouth, multiplies in the



A child receives the polio vaccine in July 2001, Congo. Photo courtesy WHO

intestine and invades the nervous system. Initial symptoms are fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness in the neck and pain in the limbs. Within hours, it can cause total paralysis.

One in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis, usually in the legs. Among those paralyzed, 5 percent to 10 percent die when their breathing muscles become immobilized. There is no cure for polio, but a vaccine, given multiple times, can protect a child for life.

In 1988, the World Health Organi-

zation (WHO) World Health Assembly – the annual meeting of health ministers of all WHO member states – voted to launch a global effort, the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. At the time, wild poliovirus was prevalent in more than 125 countries on five continents, paralyzing more than 1,000 children a day.

The initiative was spearheaded by national governments, WHO, the service organization Rotary International, CDC and UNICEF. The effort was a success because of the unprecedented cooperation of more than 200 countries and 20 million volunteers. The initiative was backed by an international investment of \$3 billion. Since 1988, some 2 billion children have been immunized against polio and 5 million have been saved from paralysis or death.

As a result of the initiative – the largest public health undertaking in history – indigenous polio has been eliminated from all but four nations – Nigeria, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

ERADICATION FACES CULTURAL CHALLENGES

The original target date for polio eradication was 2005, but poverty, conflict and cultural and religious beliefs have made it impossible to name a time when polio, like smallpox – the last case was reported in Somalia in 1977 – no longer will be a threat.

“Poverty, weaker conflicted states, and weak leadership commitments and capacity in a core of states,”

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U.S. Agency Issues Guidance for Public Face Mask Use in Pandemic

By Cheryl Pellerin
USINFO Staff Writer

Washington – Interim guidance on whether face masks or respirators should be used for personal protection in public places during an influenza pandemic was issued by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) May 3.

“If used correctly, face masks and respirators may help prevent some exposures, but they should be used along with other preventive measures, such as social distancing and hand hygiene,” the CDC said.

The agency qualified its guidance by noting information is limited on use of face masks and respirators to control pandemic influenza in community settings, and “it is difficult to assess their potential effectiveness in controlling influenza in these settings.”

A flu pandemic is a global outbreak caused by a new flu virus that spreads around the world and puts everyone at risk. Such a virus spreads easily from person to person, mostly by close contact (less than two meters) with infected people who are coughing and sneezing.

A combination of protective actions would be needed during a pandemic, according to the guidance, including washing hands, minimizing exposure by keeping infected people away from others and treating them with anti-viral drugs, having those who care for ill family members voluntarily stay home and encouraging everyone to avoid crowded places and large gatherings.

“We know that many times people will want to wear a mask if they think they’re going to be exposed to

an infectious disease, and we certainly saw that in [severe acute respiratory syndrome] SARS,” said CDC Director Dr. Julie Gerberding during a May 3 teleconference.

SARS is a human respiratory viral disease that was responsible for a major epidemic between November 2002 and July 2003, with more than 8,000 known cases and 774 deaths, according to the World Health Organization.



“We wish we had better science to help people prepare for that,” Gerberding added, “and we are doing the kinds of research studies that are going to give us a lot better information, but those results aren’t going to be available for quite a few months and possibly even a couple of years in some cases, but we didn’t want to wait.”

“Pandemic influenza remains a very real threat,” Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt said in a statement. “We continue to look for ways to protect people and reduce the spread of disease. The guidance issued today is a good step forward in the broader, multi-faceted federal effort to prepare the nation for an influenza pandemic.”

The interim recommendations are

based on the best judgment of public health experts who relied in part on information about the protective value of masks in health care facilities.

FACE MASKS AND RESPIRATORS

Face masks are loose-fitting disposable masks that cover the nose and mouth. They include products labeled as surgical, dental, medical procedure, isolation and laser masks.

Face masks stop the wearer from spreading droplets and keep splashes or sprays from reaching the wearer’s mouth and nose. They are not designed to protect against breathing in very small particles. Face masks should be used only once.

A respirator – an N95 or higher filtering facepiece respirator approved by the U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health – is designed to protect people from breathing in very small particles that might contain viruses.

“N95” means the filter on the respirator screens out 95 percent of particles 0.3 microns and larger that otherwise could pass through into the respiratory system. Higher numbers mean a higher percentage of particles are screened. N95 respirators, which are disposable and cannot be cleaned, should be worn only once.

N95 respirators usually are used in construction and other jobs that involve dust and small particles. Health care workers like nurses and doctors also use respirators when taking care of patients who have diseases that can spread through the air.

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U.S. Agency Issues Guidance for Public Face Mask . . .

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The filter and tightness of fit together determine a respirator's effectiveness. To be most effective, such respirators must fit tightly to the face so air is breathed through the filter material. Respirators are not designed to fit tightly on children or people with facial hair.

Because it screens out very small particles, a respirator gives a higher level of protection than a face mask.

CDC GUIDANCE

The CDC offered specific advice to reduce the risk of infection during a pandemic. Individuals should:

Avoid close contact and crowded conditions whenever possible, rather than relying on the use of masks or respirators;

In crowded settings, consider using face masks to protect noses and mouths from other people's coughs

and reduce the likelihood of coughing on others; and

Use respirators when contact with an infectious person cannot be avoided, such as when caring for a sick person at home.

According to the guidance, people should consider wearing a face mask during an influenza pandemic if they are sick with the flu and think they might have close contact with other people, live with someone who has flu symptoms or will spend time in a crowded public place.

People should consider wearing a respirator during an influenza pandemic if they are well and expect to be in close contact with people who are sick with pandemic flu.

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

Despite Questions, Polio Eradication Is Feasible, U.S. Officials Say . . .

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said Stephen Morrison, director of the Africa Program at CSIS, "has made it very difficult to attain high sustained repeat vaccination rates on polio. We've had persistent access problems, particularly in conflicted and insecure settings."

Another challenge involves Muslim communities in the four countries where polio still is prevalent, he said, where there is a high level of distrust of government and Western institutions, and resistance to vaccination that results in a chronic immunity gap.

Virtually all current polio victims are in Islamic states, said Kent Hill, assistant administrator for the Bureau of Global Health at USAID.

"At a time when international rela-

tions often have tension between Islamic countries and Western countries," he added, "these issues in health present us with an opportunity to increase collaboration. You just can't find people who will argue about the value of a child's life."

The number of polio cases has gone from 350,000 in 1988 to 1,997 in 2006, Hill added, making it easy to draw the wrong conclusion – that the hard work of polio eradication can be allowed to slow down.

In 2003, a polio outbreak in Nigeria spread to neighboring polio-free countries, putting 15 million children at risk and requiring a massive immunization campaign across five countries in west and central Africa. The same thing could happen today in the remaining coun-

tries where polio is prevalent.

With polio, Hill said, "you can't get 95 percent there, then just put 5 percent of your resources there and finish the job. We've got to communicate more effectively that this is one of those things you have to complete the job on, or it's always going to be there to haunt you."

More information (<http://www.polioeradication.org/>) about the Global Polio Eradication Initiative is available on the organization's Web site.

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