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News

BY ANNA GAWEL
The Washington Diplomat



Japanese Ambassador Optimistic on Recovery *Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Jacob Comenetz*

Immediately after the earthquake-tsunami-nuclear triple disaster that struck Japan on March 11, Japanese Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki told a Brookings Institution audience that Japan's resilience would allow it to quickly recover.

In a [May interview](#) with The Washington Diplomat, Fujisaki confirmed: "Yes, this is the biggest tragedy we have experienced since World War II, but saying it'll take years to recover is jumping to conclusions a little. I would fervently deny that."

On Sept. 9, Fujisaki returned to Brookings to evaluate whether his earlier optimism was justified. Six months after the crisis, despite the immensity of the natural catastrophes and the human ones that followed, Japan is well on the way to recovery, the ambassador said.

Fujisaki, who admitted to having adopted the American penchant for acronyms since taking up his post in 2008, began his keynote with one of his own: PTP, or Putting Things in Perspective. PTP was necessary, he said, "because talking about 3/11, there's sometimes a bit of exaggeration. I wanted to put everything into perspective in comparison with what has happened."

To give a sense of the scale of the catastrophes, Fujisaki compared the Great East Japan Earthquake, one of the five most powerful earthquakes recorded since modern recordkeeping began in 1900, to the August 23 Virginia earthquake felt along the U.S. East Coast. According to scientists, the Japanese earthquake released 63,000 times more energy. The resulting tsunami surged to 57 feet high, and ran up to 132 feet above sea level.

"Imagine how high that would be, how horrendous that would be," Fujisaki said. "Four-story building high."

The scale of destruction was accordingly massive. Compared to Hurricane Katrina, which resulted in \$5.5 billion in damage to infrastructure, the Japanese earthquake and tsunami caused \$44 billion in damage to infrastructure alone. This did not include the additional \$168 billion worth of buildings, equipment, and other goods lost.

Even so, in terms of economic

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impact, the earthquake and tsunami were less damaging than commonly believed, Fujisaki said. Though 2011 real GDP growth forecasts had dropped from 1.6 to -0.7 percent, according to the IMF, the Japanese economy is projected to grow 2.9 percent in 2012, rather than the 1.8 percent foreseen before the March disasters — the boost driven by recovery-related activity.



The comparatively minimal economic impact could partially be explained by the relatively small economic output of the stricken areas along the Pacific coast, amounting to just 2.5 percent of Japanese total output, Fujisaki said.

Other useful indicators for 3/11-PTP could be found in the automobile industry, a cornerstone of the Japanese economy. Though exports of vehicles from Japan to the U.S. plunged from around 120,000 before 3/11 to just 36,319 in April, they had steadily climbed back to more than 133,000 by July. Similarly, though Japanese exports of vehicle parts to the U.S. had dropped from the \$600 million range to \$464 million in the wake of the crises, by July they were back up above \$700 million, beating the pre-crisis level.

While some economists had claimed the dip in Japanese auto parts exports, precipitated by the disasters, had hampered U.S. auto manufacturing, thereby dragging down the U.S. economy as a whole, Fujisaki rejected this theory outright.

He showed, using a PowerPoint slide, that the minor slump in U.S. auto production during early 2011 had recovered by July, and that the comparatively massive slump during 2007-09 had resulted from the financial crisis.

"I'm not trying to challenge [the Federal Reserve Board] or anything, but you can see that this is the Wall Street crash, and this is the supply chain [impact]. This is not that well recognized, I think," Fujisaki said.

He next addressed reconstruction efforts. Though 75 percent of Japan's major highways were closed immediately after 3/11, nearly 100 percent had reopened within two weeks of the disasters. High-speed rail, shut down completely after the earthquake, was again fully operational within 40 days. By early September 53 percent of major port berths were functioning, a process that was taking longer due to the large amount of debris still in the water, Fujisaki said.

Perhaps the most far-reaching impact of 3/11, the nuclear accident at Fukushima Daiichi continues to reverberate within Japan, as well as internationally. Though Fujisaki emphasized that the amount of radioactive material discharged at Fukushima was only one seventh of that



released at Chernobyl in 1986, 43 of Japan's 54 nuclear power plants remained closed, and the government continues to monitor radiation levels in foodstuffs on a daily basis. How Japan, which had previously derived 26 percent of its energy from nuclear power, will meet its energy needs remains far from certain.

Though 80,000 evacuees from the disaster-stricken areas remain in temporary housing, Fujisaki concluded that on the whole, life in Japan was returning to normal. He suggested that foreigners could help Japan recover by lifting sagging tourism figures and booking a flight to the country.

"Japan is open for business," Fujisaki said. "Please do come."

Top and front page photo: Japanese Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki.

Photo: Lawrence Ruggeri

Middle photo: The March 2011 Japanese earthquake and tsunami caused \$44 billion in damage to infrastructure alone, not including an additional \$168 billion worth of buildings, equipment, and other

goods lost. This photo, taken at the port in Soma, Japan, on August 8, 2011, is an example of the damage done by the tsunami.

Credit: UN Photo/Evan Schneider

Bottom photo: Mike Weightman, leader of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Fact-Finding Mission in Japan, examines Reactor Unit 3 on May 27, 2011 at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant to assess tsunami damage. As of September 2011, 43 of Japan's 54 nuclear power plants, including Fukushima, remained closed.

Credit: UN Photo/IAEA/Greg Webb

U.S. Ambassador Optimistic About New Libya

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Martin Austermuhle

Libya is free. Moammar Gadhafi has been ousted. But like many other revolutions sweeping the Arab world, victory over an entrenched dictator has provoked both celebration and concern.

What's next? Who will govern? How will civil society, stunted by years of one-man rule, emerge and take its place at the heart of a new democracy? Will the economy be able to sustain the massive needs of Libya's people?

These were among the questions considered at "Rebuilding Libya: A Status Report on the Humanitarian Situation on the Ground" — a panel discussion hosted by the Middle East Institute and the development nonprofit International Relief and Development (IRD) on Sept. 7 at the National Press Club.

U.S. Ambassador to Libya Gene Cretz gave the keynote address in which he outlined the U.S. role in a new Libya.

Cretz began by speaking of the "pride" felt by the 63 countries that had attended the "International Conference in Support of the New Libya" in Paris a week earlier, but noted that few believed the mission had ended.

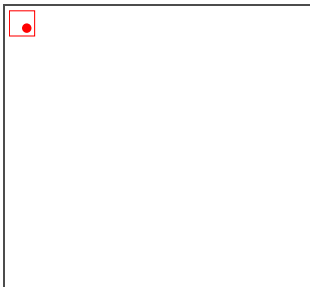
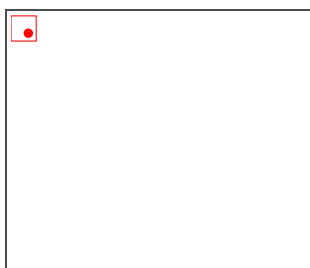
"There certainly was a sense of pride in what the international community had done over the past several months, but in no way was it a victory lap because everyone recognized that while the situation has reached a more positive place than it had been in many months, there was certainly more work to do," he said.

The National Transitional Council (NTC), the political body formed by the rebels, is now faced with the "creation" of a new country Cretz said, and the U.S. and international community will remain to help.

However Cretz said that ultimately the rebuilding of Libya should remain a Libyan affair, and that U.S. aid and assistance will be limited.

"The key to this is that this is going to Libyan-led, and we're not going to dictate the terms of how they should proceed. But we'll be there to help should they need our help," Cretz explained. "The U.S. and its allies will certainly do what we can. We're not going to be engaged in the kind of nation-building that we were in with either in Iraq or Afghanistan. It's clear that we don't have the resources to do that and this situation doesn't really lend itself to that."

He expressed his optimism about the future, noting that in areas that rebel forces had liberated throughout the conflict, hints of democracy such as newspapers and (local) NGOs had appeared without much prodding.



Mark S. Ward, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), was also hopeful.

"The situation is improving," he told the panel.

Ward explained that while USAID's role in Libya had started as strictly humanitarian relief (overall the U.S. government has provided more than \$90 million in humanitarian assistance to Libya) — including working

with NGO and international agency partners to provide medical care and food assistance, and helping to evacuate and repatriate migrant workers — its mission had now changed to transition and stabilization.

He said that USAID could provide expertise, should the NTC request it, in key areas such as organizing elections, building a free media, and strengthening civil society organizations.

He lauded the international teamwork in Libya led by the Libyans. For example he said that when Tripoli was short of drinking water, UNICEF and others sent in emergency supplies, but it was the NTC that found drinking water for city residents — a job that required ushering engineers to distant water wells in insecure regions.

"It was their work, and we've supported it as best we can," he said, calling the NTC's work "impressive."

Panelist Travis Gartner, Director of Community Stabilization at IRD was also impressed with Libyan participation in relief efforts.

He noted that IRD's small paid staff on the ground was able to distribute \$11 million worth of pharmaceuticals in Libya with the aid of large numbers of Libyan volunteers in communities throughout the country.

Despite the optimism, Gartner and Cretz both spoke of security concerns. Gartner said that security had to be addressed in order for relief and reconstruction to proceed.

"We have to have security, and in my experience that creates serious problems if it's not addressed up front," Gartner said, noting that weapons still flowed freely through the country and significant internal divisions remained.

Cretz recalled discussions at the Paris conference about the need to secure and stabilize the country — including demilitarizing citizen militias, clearing explosives and weapons left behind by the regime, and finding Gadhafi and his sons, Saadi and Saif, whom he said pose a continued threat to the future of Libya.

He noted that the NTC had already done "an amazing amount of planning," on everything from dealing with small weapons to how to stop reprisals against African migrants, and stressed that progress continued to be made in security by Libyan security forces and NATO.

While the U.S. does remain concerned about the security situation, including the proliferation of weapons in the country — many of which remain unaccounted for — the U.S. Embassy was officially re-opened in late September.

(On Sept. 27 the White House announced it planned to expand a program, in cooperation with the NTC, to secure and destroy Libya's stockpile of surface-to-air missiles, thousands of which may have gone missing. Assistant Secretary of State Andrew Shapiro told ABC News that the U.S. does not have a clear picture of exactly how many missiles are missing.)

On Sept. 22 Cretz himself raised the flag on the new embassy, which is temporarily being housed in the ambassador's (his) former residence. Embassy staff were forced out seven months ago, and the embassy was ransacked and badly burned

during the conflict.

Cretz, who first arrived in Libya in 2009 (the first U.S. ambassador in the country in more than 30 years), was forced out by the regime in December 2010 after classified government documents in which he described Gadhafi's eccentricities, were made public by WikiLeaks.

Back in Tripoli, and cautiously optimistic about Libya's future, Cretz took time to speak to reporters regarding potential business opportunities for Americans, telling the New York Times that he'd participated in a State Department conference call two weeks earlier with about 150 American companies eager to do business with Libya.

Top and front page photo: U.S. Ambassador to Libya Gene Cretz headlined a panel discussion on rebuilding Libya, at the National Press Club on Sept. 7.

Photo: Aubrey Gemignani (for International Relief and Development)

Second photo: Mark Ward, Deputy Assistant Administrator for the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was part of a panel discussion on rebuilding Libya, at the National Press Club on Sept. 7.

Photo: Aubrey Gemignani (for International Relief and Development)

Third photo: USAID/IRD hygiene kits are ready for distribution. (May 7, 2011- Libya).

Photo: Courtesy of International Relief and Development

Bottom photo: IRD medical supplies are off-loaded for distribution. (May 24, 2011- Libya)

Photo: Courtesy of International Relief and Development

OneVoice Talks Two-State Solution

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Larry Luxner

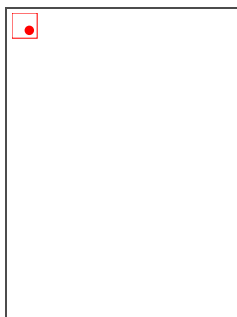
As Arabs and Jews focused their attention late last month on New York — where Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas offered drastically conflicting visions of the road to Middle East peace — two much younger men took their arguments to Washington-area colleges and universities.

Eyal Shapira, 25, and Obada Shtaya, 20, are youth ambassadors for OneVoice, a grassroots movement with offices in Tel Aviv and Ramallah, and chapters throughout Israel and the West Bank.

"We want to empower the moderate majority," said Shapira, who grew up in Mevasseret Zion, just outside Jerusalem, and now studies at Hebrew University. "We should prepare the Israeli people for the painful compromises that will have to be done once the leaders work out an agreement."

Said Shtaya, a native of Nablus: "What have we gotten out of the intifada? Check-points, enclosures and so much destruction. What we need is a peaceful movement that works towards a two-state solution. It is the only achievable and pragmatic solution for both Palestinians and the Israelis."

The young Arab and Jew — coming from different worlds — were introduced by Rachel Steinberg, international education programs director of OneVoice. Dressed in light blue shirts, they sipped on bottles of Nestea Lemon and took questions from 30 or so American University students. It was part of a week-long speaking tour (Sept. 16 – 23) that also included Georgetown University, George Washington University and Churches for Middle East Peace. OneVoice has organized the event



every year since 2007.

"Our focus is on building a constituency for a two-state solution," said the group's CEO, Howard J. Sumka, former director of U.S. Agency for International Development in the West Bank and Gaza. "We do that primarily by working on the ground in Israel and Palestine. We have parallel movements; the purpose of those offices is to identify and train youth leaders. They in turn organize chapters. In Israel the chapters are organized on campuses such as Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University and Bar-Ilan University. On the Palestinian side, chapters are instead organized in communities such as Hebron, Bethlehem, Nablus, Jenin, Ramallah, Tulkarem, Qalqilya, Selit al Daher and Jericho."

Established in 2003, OneVoice operates on an annual budget of \$1.5 million; most of that money comes from private donors and foundations. Its International Education Program, based in New York, connects the movement's youth network to American college students who have an interest in the conflict.

Today, said Sumka, citing recent surveys, 78 percent of Israelis and 74 percent of Palestinians are willing to accept a two-state solution based loosely on Israel's pre-1967 borders. On the flip side, one bi-national state for both Arabs and Jews is unacceptable to 59 percent of Palestinians, and 66 percent of Israelis.

Sumka said OneVoice is not a "dialogue organization." Rather, it operates separately but on parallel tracks in Israel and Palestine, meaning that "each track speaks powerfully and authentically to the political, cultural and social needs of its own society, and appeals primarily to nationalistic self-interest. This creates a real sense of pride, national identity and ownership, as Palestinians and Israelis appeal to their fellow citizens to act for the sake of their own future."

As for what average Americans can do to speed the Arab-Israeli peace process along, the nonprofit, non-partisan organization urges sympathizers to "follow us on Facebook and Twitter, start a OneVoice chapter on your campus, launch a town hall meeting and make donations to Peaceworks Foundation."

Lasting peace won't come a moment too soon for OneVoice's two traveling ambassadors.

"My experience with the occupation began when I was one year old," said Shtaya, a Muslim who's pursuing a degree in English literature and spent last year as an exchange student in Turkey. His father, accused of being a member of Hamas, was restricted in his travels for nearly 20 years and imprisoned nine times.



"This period was very tough for me," he said. "Every time the Israelis demolish houses, it reminds Palestinians that they're still occupied and humiliated." But the point, Shtaya stressed, is no longer about who started the conflict.

"Now it's 2011, not 1948. We must try to keep the conversation on the two-state solution alive," he said. "If not, they're going to get bored and apathetic, or they'll revert to violence, which is not recommended." Shapira told his audience that he was 15 when the second intifada broke out.

"I cannot say that a terrorist attack took place on a daily or weekly basis, but it was something we feared every day. One day, an attack took place at a high school, and four students were killed. They were the same age I was at the time, and it just happened out of the blue. Every household in Israel had the same dilemma those days: whether we should lock ourselves up at home, waiting for the storm to pass, or keep living our lives despite the danger outside. So my family and I kept on living our lives." But then, Shapira spent three years as a combat soldier in the West Bank. He also served in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip.

"The experiences I had in the army, seeing how Israeli soldiers are dealing with impossible situations, just strengthened my feelings that something had to be done, and this made me join OneVoice," he said. "My friends and I realized that we cannot keep on counting the victims on both sides. We are the victims of this conflict, and we are the ones who have to take things into our own hands, because it affects all of us."

Asked who their heroes were, Shapira answered, without hesitation: "Yitzhak Rabin." And Shtaya said "Yasser Arafat."

But both men are dead, and therein lies the problem on both sides, said Shapira. "We don't have any leaders who can bring the two sides back to negotiations. Hopefully, we will have in the future."

Top photo: Eyal Shapira, a 25-year-old Israeli Jew from Jerusalem, pushes for the "two-state solution" during a speech at Washington's American University in late September.

Bottom and front page photo: Obada Shtaya, a 20-year-old Palestinian from Ramallah, pushes for the "two-state solution" during a speech at Washington's American University in late September.

Photos: Larry Luxner

D.C. Fall Offers Cornucopia of Culture

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Jacob Comenetz

Fitting for the season of abundance, Washington promises a veritable cornucopia of cultural offerings this fall.

In addition to the big-name venues — The Kennedy Center, the National Gallery of Art (NGA), and their brethren — a highly diverse array of exhibitions, film festivals, and performances can be discovered throughout the city, often in intimate and unexpected locations.



These happenings, many of them organized by Washington's international community, underscore the city's status as a capital of culture as well as politics.

Spanish Culture Thriving in America

The Spanish embassy's cultural department must have worked overtime to put together the vast program of fall/winter cultural events recently launched under the "Spain Arts & Culture" aegis.

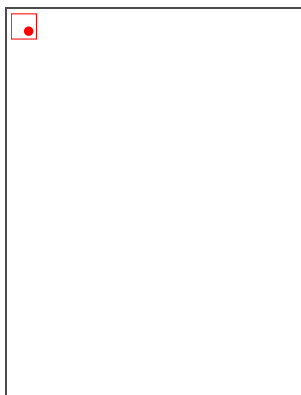
The SPAIN arts & culture Fall/Winter 2011 program showcases the best of Spain's film, photography, design, architecture, music, literature, performing arts, visual arts and more, which are being featured in cultural events across 10 states through February 2012.

The program book alone is a work of art. Visually dazzling — more museum catalogue than paper ephemera — it was designed by the internationally renowned Madrid-based studio Serial Cut. The program website (<http://www.spainculture.us/>), as informative as it is sleek, will similarly please design aficionados.

At the Sept. 16 kickoff party at the former Spanish ambassador's residence on 16th Street (partially refurbished for the occasion), cultural coordinator Xavier Ruiz said that despite the current climate of fiscal austerity, the embassy's cultural team still found ways to ensure Spanish culture thrived in America.

"We try to be smart. Maybe now is not the moment to bring super big things, but there's still interesting things we can do," he said.

The embassy, working closely with the Ministry of Culture, the Spanish cultural center Instituto Cervantes, the General Consulates Network, the Spain-USA foundation, and other partners, has especially ambitious plans for cinema this season.



Spanish films will be shown in more than 18 festivals across the country, including four films at the American Film Institute in Silver Spring.

Other "Spain Arts & Culture" DC-area highlights include the Young Architects of Spain (YAS) show at the American Institute of Architects (Sept. 15-Oct. 14); the Pastrana Tapestries exhibition at the National Gallery of Art (Sept. 18-Jan. 8, 2012); and the work of Spanish photographers featured at FotoWeek DC (Nov. 5-12) and the Mexican Cultural Institute (Nov. 9-Jan. 15, 2012).

Mexican Embassy and Mexican Cultural Institute Host Artist-In-Residence

The Embassy of Mexico and the Mexican Cultural Institute (MCI) are also expanding Spanish-language cultural offerings in DC this fall as they jointly launch an Artist-in-Residence program in cooperation with the Corcoran College of Art + Design, among other partners.

The first participant, world-renowned Mexican artist Carlos Amorales, will reside in the newly restored carriage house of the MCI while working on a project with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Though the Artist-in-Residence program is starting with a single visual artist, its Mexican sponsors hope to expand it to include writers, filmmakers, and musicians, among others. As a tool of public diplomacy, the sponsors believe it should also engage additional Washington cultural institutions, schools, and community organizations, to build stronger ties between Mexico and the U.S.

Rare Exhibition Commemorates 150 Years of Italian Unification

The "Regions of Italy" exhibition, commemorating 150 years of Italian unification, opened at the Italian embassy this month and runs until Oct. 30.

It promises to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience. This particular exhibition is updated and displayed in Italy only once every 50 years to celebrate the nation's unification, and it's the first time it's been shown in the U.S.

Professor Giuliano Amato, former Italian prime minister and currently chairman of the Board of Trustees for the 150th Anniversary of Italy's Unification, joined Italian Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, organizers, invited guests, and the media, to inaugurate the exhibition at a special ceremony and cocktail reception at the embassy on Oct. 4.

"Italian unity was the outcome of a complex political commitment, ideals and aspiration," said the Italian ambassador. "While we are celebrating this important milestone, we are therefore called upon, in a sense, to rediscover these very principles and the reasons that bind us together."

The most representative artists from each of the 20 regions of Italy, and the three historical periods of the Italian art scene since the nation's 1861 unification, are being showcased.

This includes masterpieces by leading artists of the 19th and 20th centuries such as

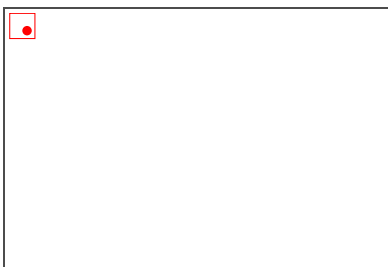
Giovanni Fattori, Giacomo Favretto, Costantino Nivola, Fabrizio Clerici, and Giorgio Morandi.

Through art, video, and special objects, the display also highlights the leading figures, technological achievements, culture, and industrial heritage of all the regions over the past 150 years.

The exhibition is open to the public weekdays Oct. 5 to Oct. 30, 10:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at the Embassy of Italy, 3000 Whitehaven Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008.

Kids Euro Festival Includes 200 Free Events

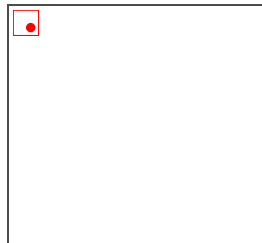
Early exposure to different cultures can foster a lifelong appreciation for the arts, as well as tolerance towards others.



This idea underlies the Kids Euro Festival , returning to Washington for its fourth year with more than 200 free events throughout the DC metropolitan area.

The gigantic cultural festival, designed for children ages two to 12 (and their parents!) takes place from Oct. 14 through Nov. 10. It's an organizational feat pulled off thanks to the cooperation of the 27 EU embassies, over 20 local cultural institutions, the DC Public Library system (activities take place at all 25 branches), the DC Arts and Humanities Education Collaborative, Prince George's County Schools, the French-American Cultural Foundation, and many more.

What better way than puppetry, music, theater, and storytelling to help make the foreign familiar, and Europe a little bit closer. (<http://kidseurofestival.org/>)



Front page photo: A musical theater troupe from Greece performs a fairytale about bravery, knowledge, intelligence, and love called "Of Fire, of the Wind, and of the No Returning Path" — coming to the Kids Euro Festival.

Photo: Courtesy of Kids Euro Festival

Top photo: Kraft paper becomes an instrument of nature, creating the sounds of crashing waves, rustling leaves, the crackling of a fire's flames, and all the while, telling stories in this offering from Spain called "Kraft" at the Kids Euro Festival.

Photo: Courtesy of Kids Euro Festival

Second photo: Guests enjoy the Embassy of Spain's launch party for the SPAIN arts & culture Fall/Winter 2011 Program — held at the at the former Spanish ambassador's residence on 16th Street in D.C. on Sept. 16. From left, Miren Fernandez, Cristina Garcia and Yolanda Rodriguez.

Photo: Jacob Comenetz

Third photo: From left, Dr. Giancarlo Bravi, Coordinator of the Mission Unity for the 150th anniversary of the Italian Unification, Italian Ambassador Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, and former prime minister of Italy Professor Giuliano Amato (Chairman of the Board of Trustees for the 150th Anniversary of Italy's Unification) chat at the Oct. 4th opening of the "Regions of Italy" exhibition commemorating 150 years of Italian unification.

The painting in the background is "I Morticelli" by Francesco Paolo Michelli (1880, oil on canvas, Superintendence for the Historical, Artistic and Ethno-anthropological. Abruzzo, L'Aquila) This particular painting is one of the pieces of art saved after the earthquake that hit the Abruzzo region in 2009.

Photo: www.photozee.com

Bottom photo: A dance theater troupe from Austria performs "To and From: My Little Journey Through the Day", which explores one full day of adventures in a young girl's life — coming to the Kids Euro Festival.

Photo: Courtesy of Kids Euro Festival

Migrant Worker Rights Protected

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Julie Poucher Harbin

At a ceremony timed to coincide with the start of National Labor Rights Week (Aug. 29-Sept. 6), the embassies of Dominican Republic, Costa Rica and El Salvador signed joint declarations and arrangements with the U.S. Department of Labor aimed at protecting the labor rights of migrant workers in the U.S.

United States Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis said the Department of Labor (DOL) aims "to help workers and employers understand that labor laws are enforced and enforceable, giving everyone the opportunity to comply with the U.S. laws that cover

all workers."

"Unfortunately, due to language barriers and immigration status, migrant workers can be vulnerable to abuse. We are committed to ending this abuse," Solis explained at the August 29th ceremony, which was attended by Dominican Republic Ambassador Anibal de Castro, Costa Rican Ambassador Muni Figueres Boggs, El Salvador Political Counselor Claudia Beltran, Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan, Nicaraguan Ambassador Francisco Campbell and Guatemalan Ambassador Julio Martini Herrera.

Mexico, Nicaragua and Guatemala had previously signed agreements similar to those signed by Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and El Salvador.

Under the agreements, the embassies and consulates will distribute information about U.S. health, safety and wage laws to migrant workers, and help the DOL communicate with those workers.



In turn DOL Health & Safety inspectors and Wage & Hour investigators will work with the embassies and consulates to correct injustices that migrant workers face. The Labor Department's Wage and Hour Division will protect the rights of migrant workers in low-wage industries such as hospitality and agriculture, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration will continue efforts to improve workplace safety and health conditions and provide outreach and assistance to Spanish-speaking workers and employers.

Solis also announced a toll-free "We Can Help" hotline (1-866-487-9243) that migrant workers could access to report labor-related problems they're having.

"We understand that many migrant workers in America are afraid to report mistreatment because it can lead to more abuse, the loss of their job or deportation. With these partnerships, we seek to remove these fears," said Solis. "We're making it easier for immigrant workers to come forward by partnering with the institutions where they are most likely to go for help — their own country's consulates."



The DOL's office of public affairs told The Pouch in an e-mail that the Department of Labor does not collect information on the legal status of workers.

"The mission of the Department of Labor is to foster, promote, and develop the welfare of wage earners, assure work-related benefits and rights, and to enforce U.S. labor laws," wrote Director of Public Affairs Gloria Della, adding that these laws include the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), the Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act (MSPA) and the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSH). "These laws have always protected workers without regard to whether an employee is documented or undocumented, and are enforceable for employees who are covered under the provisions of these Acts."

As Secretary Solis said at the signing ceremony, "We renew our promise to everyone who does an honest day's work in America. No matter how you got here or how long you plan to stay, you have rights. You have the right to a safe and healthy workplace and the right to a legal wage."

The signing ceremony was held in conjunction with a conversation with Ambassador Sarukhan about National Labor Rights Week — an initiative that was



started by the Mexican embassy in 2009 and has since grown into an important event for Mexican and Central American migrant communities.



This year, the Labor Department and a network of 50 Mexican consulates across the country worked together to educate migrant workers on their rights and responsibilities under U.S. laws.

"With this protection mechanism for the labor rights of immigrants, which we have been strengthening over the past years, we are promoting a better understanding among the American public regarding the crucial and complimentary role that migrant labor has played in the economic vitality of this nation," said Sarukhan during the opening ceremony.

Solis thanked migrant workers — who tend to work in hard-to-fill occupations, many of which are low paying and difficult — for their contributions to the economy.

She said that "despite the rhetoric of some politicians in Washington" the country relies on their contributions.

Solis said she'd heard from many U.S. business leaders who "depend on the talents and work ethic of migrant workers" and pointed out that it was mostly immigrant workers who rebuilt the Pentagon "in record time" — working 20-hour days and through holidays, following the 9/11 attacks. She said more than 40 percent of them were Latino, and most were Salvadorans who had immigrated to the D.C. area in the 1980s to escape civil war.

"When migrant workers are made to work in unsafe conditions or not paid the wages they're owed, it has a ripple effect across our whole economy. Labor law violations create downward pressures on the wages and working conditions of all workers," she said. "Most American businesses follow the law, but we know that a few bad actors can gain an unfair advantage over their competitors. Today, we take a historic step to level the playing field."

Solis said that the Labor Department planned to pursue accords with governments from Southeast Asia "to educate and protect their vulnerable workers as well."

Top photo: Participants take a group photo after the signing ceremony and conversation on Labor Rights Week on Aug. 29.

Front row from left: OSHA Assistant Secretary David Michaels, Libby Hendrix of WHD, U.S. Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis, Costa Rican Ambassador Muni Figueres Boggs, El Salvador Political Counselor Claudia Beltran, Guatemalan Ambassador Julio Martini-Herrera.

Back row from left: ILAB Deputy Undersecretary Sandra Polaski, Joe Hansen of UFCW, Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan, Eliseo Medina of the Service Employees International, Nicaraguan Ambassador Francisco Campbell, and Dominican Republic Ambassador Anibal de Castro.

Middle and front page photo: Dominican Republic Ambassador Anibal de Castro (right) shakes hands with United States Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis after signing an arrangement to educate migrant workers on U.S. laws on Aug. 29.

Bottom photo: From left, United States Secretary of Labor Hilda L. Solis is joined by Mexican Ambassador Arturo Sarukhan at the signing ceremony and launch of Labor Rights Week on Aug. 29.

Photos: Courtesy of U.S. Department of Labor

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