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DIPLOMATIC POUCH

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News

BY ANNA GAWEL
The Washington Diplomat



Clinton Urges Reform at U.S.-Islamic Forum

In Washington, there's been no shortage of conferences and discussions that have sprung up in response to the so-called Arab spring, but one gathering in particular stands out for its influential take on the revolutions that continue to rock and redefine the Arab world.

The eighth annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum, held at the Mandarin Oriental in Washington from April 12 to 14, was jam-packed with political heavy-hitters and explored a range of timely topics — from Muslim minorities in the West, to off-the-record assessments of the stalled Middle East peace process, to the roles of youth and the media in the recent uprisings.



All of these issues directly touch the forum's sponsor, Qatar, a small but wealthy Persian Gulf emirate that is crafting a bold foreign policy in response to the turmoil and, many say, punching above its weight on the global stage.

So far there haven't been any protests in Qatar, which in fact became the first Arab country to formally recognize the rebels in Libya and provided six fighter jets to the NATO campaign to protect civilians against Col. Muammar Qaddafi's forces.

It's a delicate balancing act for Qatar, a country of 1.4 million that's surrounded by much larger and more powerful neighbors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. But Qatar, flush with natural gas riches, wields its own considerable influence as a regional powerbroker, home of the Al Jazeera media network, and site of the 2022 World Cup, a major coup for the tiny nation.

"For the past decade or so, Qatar has skillfully straddled the competing groups of allies in the region — Egypt and Saudi Arabia versus Iran and Syria — achieving a status of neutrality that has allowed it to broker political deals in Lebanon, Sudan and Yemen," wrote Clifford Krauss in an April 3 New York Times article. "At the same time, Al Jazeera has given a voice to dissidents, has rankled autocrats across the region, and has been both blamed and praised as a driving force behind the current 'Arab Spring.'"



Perhaps as testament to Qatar's growing clout, this year's U.S.-Islamic World Forum was held for the first time ever outside of Doha, in Washington, D.C. Co-sponsored by the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs along with the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, the forum's guest list read like a who's who in U.S. policy circles: Sens. John Kerry (D-Mass.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.), the National Security Council's Dennis Ross, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, former Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, Fareed Zakaria of Time magazine and David Brooks of the New York Times, along with scholars and pundits galore.

The star attraction was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who spoke at the gala dinner at the Andrew W. Mellon Auditorium — echoing many of the views that made headlines the last time she swung through Doha, when she sharply, and presciently, warned that the region's foundations were "sinking into the sand."

"While some countries have made great strides in governance, in many others people have grown tired of corrupt institutions and a stagnant political order.... Those who cling to the status quo may be able to hold back the full impact of their countries' problems for a little while, but not forever," she bluntly told a group of Arab leaders, many of them U.S. allies, gathered in Doha on Jan. 13, one day before longtime Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was forced from power and roughly a month before Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak met the same fate.



Echoes of the Past
The Buddhist Cave Temples
of Kiangtanshan

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
February 26–July 31, 2011

Smithsonian Institution

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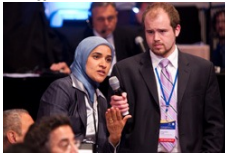
At the U.S.-Islamic Forum in

Washington, Clinton candidly reiterated that the old Arab way of ruling is stifling development and simply no longer tenable. "Uprisings across the region have exposed myths that for too long were used to justify a stagnant status quo," she said, above all denouncing "the myth that Arabs do not share universal human aspirations for freedom, dignity and opportunity." "Today's new generation of young people rejects these false narratives," she added. "That is why this January in Doha, just weeks after a desperate young Tunisian street vendor set fire to himself in public protest, I talked with the leaders of the region about the need to move faster to meet their people's needs and aspirations."

And as in Doha a few months earlier, Clinton returned to many of the same criticisms, from rampant youth unemployment to corruption-laden cronyism. "First, can the leaders and citizens of the region reform economies that are now overly dependent on oil exports and stunted by corruption? Overall, Arab countries were less industrialized in 2007 than they were in 1970," Clinton pointed out. "Unemployment often runs more than double the worldwide average, and even worse for women and young people. While a growing number of Arabs live in poverty, crowded into slums without sanitation, safe water or reliable electricity, a small elite has increasingly concentrated control of the region's land and wealth in their hands."

She noted initiatives such as "Partners for a New Beginning" to boost trade and spur foreign investment, along with direct economic assistance, to help the region create jobs and sustainable growth.

Clinton though largely confined her comments to the need for economic reform, veering away from openly advocating for regime change, although she urged Arab governments to stop muzzling dissent. "Citizens have spent decades under martial law or emergency rule. Political parties and civil society groups are subject to repression and restriction. Judicial systems are far from either free or independent. And elections, when they are held, are often rigged," she lamented.



She also specifically called for

greater women's rights, a central theme of her diplomatic work, noting that "you cannot have a claim to a democracy if half the population is left out."

"Now, all of these challenges — from deep unemployment to widespread corruption to the lack of respect and opportunities for women — have fueled frustration among the region's young people. And changing leaders alone will not be enough to satisfy them — not if cronyism and closed economies continue to choke off opportunity and participation, or if citizens can't rely on police and the courts to protect their rights," Clinton cautioned, arguing that protesters now need to channel that energy into the hard, tedious work of building political coalitions to put the revolutions' gains into practice.

Many people though were watching Clinton's speech for clues on what America's role in that process might be. So far, the Obama administration has tailored its response to each affected nation, intervening militarily in Libya while offering only tepid criticism of the clampdowns in Bahrain and Yemen, for instance — frustrating pundits looking for some sort of grand democracy-promotion doctrine for the uprisings.

Clinton though said "a one-sized-fits-all approach doesn't make sense in such a diverse region at such a fluid time. As I have said before, the United States has specific relationships with countries in the region," citing the decades-long friendship with Bahrain as an example.

Although she added that Bahrain's ruling monarchy should refrain from violence, Clinton barely mentioned the brutal security crackdown that has drawn widespread condemnation by human rights groups. Likewise, she glossed over the violence targeted at protesters in Yemen, merely saying that Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh should "resolve the political impasse with the opposition so that meaningful political change can take place." Rather, Clinton saved her harshest words for Qaddafi, blasting the Libyan leader for turning his guns on his own people and unleashing "a rein of terror against people who had no means to defend themselves."

The sharp differences in tone are a reflection of the struggle the United States confronts in balancing its strategic and security interests while adhering to its democratic principles (also see "As Arab World Rolls in Uncertainty, What's at Stake for U.S. Interests?" in the current May 2010 issue of The Washington Diplomat).

Yet even in Libya — where the Obama administration seems to have only reluctantly joined the air campaign against Qaddafi, adamantly refusing to put U.S. boots on the ground — an overarching theme has emerged: American power abroad, weighted down by the invasion of two Muslim nations that's stretched U.S. military and financial resources, has its limits, and the United States can't be a global policeman.

So unlike George W. Bush's sweeping efforts to instill democracy in the Middle East, President Obama has made it clear that democracy can't be dictated or shaped by the outside forces.

The secretary of state confirmed that the onus will be on Arab citizens to devise their own governments because "democracy cannot be transplanted wholesale from one country to another."

"But there are universal rights that apply to everyone and universal values that undergird vibrant democracies everywhere," Clinton added, citing freedom of speech and protest, human rights and "core" American values such as countering Iran and the threat of extremism.

On that front, Clinton offered another prescient tidbit, arguing that al-Qaeda's hold on the region has been eroded — three weeks before Osama bin Laden, the terrorist group's spiritual leader, was killed by U.S. forces, finally ending the world's biggest manhunt.

"Al-Qaeda's propagandists have tried to yoke the region's peaceful popular movements to their murderous ideology. Their claims to speak for the dispossessed and downtrodden have never rung so hollow. Their arguments that the only way is violent change have never been so fully discredited," Clinton said.

But whether Arab leaders, or the United States for that matter, get credit for ushering in fundamental change in the Arab world is a whole other question, one for which Clinton had no answer, as she openly wondered whether this forum, like so many others before it, would wind up being just another impotent talk shop.

"Will the people and leaders of the Middle East and North Africa pursue a new, more inclusive approach to solving the region's persistent political, economic, and social challenges? Will they consolidate the progress of recent weeks and address long-denied aspirations for dignity and opportunity?" she asked. "Or, when we meet again at this forum in one year or five years or 10, will we have seen the prospects for reform fade and remember this moment as just a mirage in the desert?"

North Africa to the Middle East, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Arab leaders to reform their stagnant economies and open up their political systems at the eighth annual U.S.-Islamic Forum in Washington, D.C., where she joined prominent decision-makers such as, second photo from left, Martin Indyk, director of foreign policy for the Brookings Institution, which co-hosted the forum, and Minister Mohammed Abdullah Al-Rumaihi of Qatar, the event's main sponsor, as well as Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), third photo, who spoke at a panel on geo-strategic issues in the Middle East and South Asia.

Photos: Paul Morse Photo / U.S.-Islamic Forum

Hope and Caution Over World's Water Woes

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Julie Poucher Harbin

By 2025, two-thirds of the world's population will live in areas facing moderate to severe water stress, including more areas within developed countries, according to the United Nations.

Despite some progress, 1.1 billion people worldwide still lack access to safe drinking water and 2.6 billion have no access to basic sanitation.



The world's water crisis was brought into sharp focus this spring in Washington, D.C., at a variety of forums that kicked off with World Water Day on March 22. "The water crisis is a health crisis, it's a farming crisis, it's an economic crisis, it's a climate crisis, and increasingly, it is a political crisis. And therefore, we must have an equally comprehensive response," said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the "Water for the Future" event at the World Bank Headquarters, where she signed a memorandum of understanding between the U.S. government and World Bank to collaborate on water-related areas. A few weeks later on April 15, the Rotary Club of Washington, D.C., and Rotary Club Paris Academies hosted a "Water is Life: International Summit on Water in Developing Countries 2011" to discuss meeting the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) intended to halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015.

"As we are generating new water sources at a very rapid rate around the globe. At the same time we're failing miserably as far as sanitation is concerned," said Samuel Lee Hancock, president and executive director of the nonprofit group EmeraldPlant. "It's hard to imagine that people are actually out drinking mud in order to survive in many countries."



Indeed, the reality of water scarcity isn't a pretty picture, and has more far-reaching effects than most people realize. More than 5,000 people die each day from causes linked to unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene - the majority of whom are children. The World Health Organization estimates that diarrhea alone causes 1.5 million deaths per year. Women and girls are also disproportionately affected. For example, millions of women and girls walk for hours every day to collect water for their households, putting their lives at risk in areas where sexual violence is rampant. Or they spend so much time trying to collect water that there's little time left for education. Widespread studies have confirmed that when there's access to water and sanitation, school attendance skyrockets. Water touches nearly aspect of development, as Maria Otero, U.S. undersecretary of state for democracy and global affairs, recently pointed out: "The bottom line is this: If we are serious about improving child health, achieving universal primary education, ensuring gender equity, and stimulating economic development, we need to be serious about providing safe water, sanitation, and hygiene education in schools." Otero was among many government officials who joined a range of policy experts, diplomats, and representatives from international NGOs and businesses at the Water is Life summit, where despite the dire predictions, the overall tone of the discussions was one of cautious optimism, highlighting implementable, real-world solutions to a brewing crisis of water shortages - that in turn can spark resource-related conflicts.

Otero, for instance, noted that 265 river basins worldwide are shared by two or more countries, and that "without collaboration, these can become points of tension and even security threats."

These threats can also exacerbate divisions in hotspots where tensions already run high. For example, the 2011 Water Stress Index, developed by the British-based global risk advisory firm Maplecroft, has rated Mauritania, Kuwait, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, Niger, Iraq, Oman, the United Arab Emirates and Syria as the top 10 nations at "extreme risk" for water stress. Water stress in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is not surprising, according to Maplecroft, as it only receives 1 percent of the world's precipitation and countries rely on trans-boundary water supplies. For example, the Jordan River, which provides 25 to 30 percent of Israel's water and 75 percent of Jordan's, has long been a source of friction between the two countries.



Water security has also become an issue in Central Asia, where "water wars" are threatening to erupt over individual countries' irrigation and power generation needs.

Abdjabbor Shirinov, Tajikistan's ambassador in the United States, told water summit attendees that while his country is water-rich - 60 percent of the region's fresh water comes from inside the country - it is fossil-fuel poor. Tajikistan also suffers from numerous power cuts during cold winters and needs to build more dams for more energy production, but its neighbors are worried.

"There is rising tensions about using this water because for example our neighbors, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, they hold some feelings that the construction of hydropower stations by upstream countries will cause the lack of water in irrigation season in downstream countries," explained Shirinov.

To compound the water problem, Central Asia's five main rivers depend on glacial melt, which Kyrgyz Ambassador Muktar Djumaliev said is being threatened. He noted that by 2025, the glaciers will be reduced by 30 to 40 percent, which in turn will sap the volume of the main rivers by 25 percent - with no glaciers in Central Asia by 2100. Kyrgyzstan, a fellow upstream country, is also keen to build more hydroelectric stations.

Meanwhile, Uzbek Ambassador Ilhomjon Tuychievich Nematov stressed the importance of agriculture to his country's economy. Despite access to rivers, lakes and ground water, Uzbekistan saw a decline in water resources since independence that has forced them to slash cotton production by 50 percent. "Uzbekistan was never against constructing any power station, but all power stations should be constructed in the interest of all regional countries, and of course after the appropriate expertise in terms of ecological, technical, security," said Nematov.

Interestingly, developed countries aren't immune to future water shortages. The Maplecroft study also rated Australia (19) and the United States (51) as "high risk" because in parts of each country, water demand exceeds the total renewable water resources by 80 percent.

In fact, a report released in late April by the Department of Interior warned that climate change was likely to diminish already scarce water supplies in the western United States. Annual flows in the Colorado, Rio Grand and San Joaquin river basins - which provide water to eight states as well as parts of Mexico - could decline by as much as 8 percent to 14 percent over the next 40 years.

"What are we going to do about western water?" Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) asked the crowd attending an Institute for Education-sponsored public policy roundtable in early April that touched on climate change and water issues facing the American Southwest. "The Colorado River, which is the biggest river in the west, supplies upper basin states and lower basin states. We now believe there's going to be 20 percent less water on a permanent basis. So you can imagine the conflict [between] these states that have been relying on this water."

Africa is another part of the world confronting water scarcity. Junaid Kamal Ahmad, the World Bank's sector manager for water and sanitation on the continent, said that 30 countries in Africa are on track to meet the U.N. Millennium Goals with a significant rise in access to clean water in Senegal, Uganda and Burkina Faso.

"I walk away after 15 to 20 years in this business being optimistic, because I would not have predicted the changes in Africa," he said. "Water service in Uganda moved to 24-hour systems. Not one city in South Asia has 24-hour water systems. In Africa I can give you 10 countries that have 24-seven water systems."

Boubaca Moussa Rilla, economic counselor at the Niger Embassy in Washington, was not so optimistic. Niger, which depends on outside sources for 90 percent of its water needs, ranks sixth in the world on Maplecroft's Water Stress Index.

Rilla said that with recurring droughts, declining rainfall, desertification and a population growing at more than 5 percent annually - the fastest in Africa - Niger is facing a crisis. Indeed, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, undernourishment is widespread in Niger and the majority of the rural population doesn't have access to safe drinking water. Most in fact rely on pond water that is often contaminated with guinea worms, animal waste and chemicals.

Rilla made a plea to the international community for help, while urging his own recently elected government to make water a priority. "With such a growing population water is a need. More than a need, water is a necessity. Without water, no one can survive."



Some countries though are joining forces to combat the problem. For example, Cape Verde has partnered with Costa Rica, Iceland, Singapore, Slovenia and the UAE to create a "green group" that highlights the link between climate change and water, as well as the importance of improved water management in successfully addressing the impact of climate change.

Maria de Fatima Lima da Veiga, Cape Verde's ambassador here, told summit attendees that her island nation grapples with irregular rainfall, periodic droughts and related food shortages.

"People are surprised that Cape Verde has been suffering from water shortages and drought for decades," said da Veiga. "People normally tend to equate islands with abundance of water and vegetation... Despite being surrounded by water, water scarcity has always impacted the life of the Cape Verde people and the island's environment."

She said her government has taken steps to boost water supply, including increasing the production of desalinated water and drip irrigation, starting the construction of 17 dams, introducing hydroponics, and increasing government loans and technical training for farmers.

Nations around the world have pursued community-based, low-tech solutions such as rooftop rainwater collection as well as high-tech innovations - an approach the "Water is Life" summit advocates to alleviate water shortages and improve sanitation.

Arthur Keys, president and chief executive officer of International Relief and Development (IRD), pointed out that in Zimbabwe, IRD is training people how to collect water on their rooftops to expand household and agricultural water use while cutting back on the need for women to walk far distances to collect water.

These micro-solutions are gaining credence over large-scale projects such as hydro-dams, as illustrated by Morocco, another water-scarce country. "We started our policy in building dams in the 1950s [to generate hydro-electric power]. Now in some places we have enough dams, but these dams depend on the rainfall," and rainfall is limited, explained Abdeslam Zefri, economic counselor at the Embassy of Morocco in Washington.

So Morocco has employed technologies such as drip irrigation, well-digging and artificial precipitation, according to Zefri. The country has even assisted Senegal and Burkina Faso with artificial rain technology.

And while government agencies, the World Bank, Rotary and various international NGOs are providing critical assistance and clever thinking to help nations tackle their water shortages, Ahmad of the World Bank stressed the importance of community involvement for any program to ultimately work. "If you want to change the flow of water, change the flow of money," he said.

"Do not fix the pipes. Fix the institutions that fix the pipes."

Front and bottom photo: A boy carries water in Cape Verde's capital city Praia.

Water is a precious commodity in the island country, which has suffered for decades from water shortages and drought.

Photo: Larry Luxner

Top photo: The Rotary Club of Washington, D.C., and Rotary Club Paris Academies hosted an international summit called "Water is Life" on April 15.

Some of the panelists, from left, included Director of the Department of International Cooperation at the Embassy of Uruguay Paola Repetto, Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic Muktar Djumalev, Ambassador of Tajikistan Abdujabbor Shirinov, and Ambassador of Uzbekistan Ilhomjon Tuychievich Nematov, as well as moderator Lisa-Marie Monsanto.

Photo: Julie Poucher Harbin

Second photo: Children collect water in Kallayanpur slum, an urban slum in Dhaka, Bangladesh. More than 1.5 million children die each year as a result of diarrhea caused by poor water.

Credit: UN Photo/Kibae Park

Third photo: From left, Ambassador of the Kyrgyz Republic Muktar Djumalev, Ambassador of Tajikistan Abdujabbor Shirinov, and Uzbekistan Ambassador

Ilhomjon Tuychievich Nematov pledge cooperation in the management of water resources at the "Water is Life" summit. They are trying to strike a balance in the management of water resources for both irrigation and power generation.
Photo: Julie Poucher Hartin

U.S. Envoy Fights Alzheimer's

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Jacob Comenetz

In 2008, as a senior U.S. diplomat working as Tony Blair's head of mission in Jerusalem on Mideast peace, Donald Bandler realized that he was having difficulty processing and retaining new information - essential functions in such a high-powered role.



His wife Jane first noticed subtle changes in Don, who had previously served as U.S. ambassador to Cyprus and special assistant to President Clinton, among many other high-level positions over a 28-year career in the Foreign Service. At the age of 61, he was finding it more challenging to remember names and dates and to organize and plan, something he had never had trouble with before. After visiting a top Israeli neurologist and undergoing a broad diagnostic exam, the Bandlers returned to the United States for a "battery of neuropsychological testing" at Johns Hopkins and Georgetown University hospitals. In November 2008, Don received the diagnosis: early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

For the Bandlers, who live in Bethesda, Md., and have three children in their 20s and 30s, as well as a new grandson, the crushing news was taken as a call to action to raise awareness of the disease, its increasingly dire impact on aging societies around the world, and the fact that early-stage sufferers have much to contribute - to their families and their communities.

"Instead of giving up, floundering around, I'm keeping active," Don Bandler told the Diplomatic Pouch. He is serving on the board of several organizations, keeping up with international travel, and writing commentaries on issues such as relations between Russia, Georgia and Ukraine.



In addition, he is currently serving as an elected member of the Early Stage Advisory Group (ESAG) of the Alzheimer's Association. The U.S.-based, globally active organization supports individuals and families confronting the disease, advocates for legislative reform, and acts as the largest private nonprofit funder of Alzheimer's research.

The association recently hosted its eighth annual National Alzheimer's Gala in Washington, D.C., a premier fundraising event that has raised more than \$9 million over the years to address the issue. This year's gala raised \$825,000.

Bandler and his wife attended the black-tie gala, held at the National Building Museum on April 6, along with hundreds of guests, including Emmy-winning actor and gala host David Hyde Pierce, 16 senators, 20 representatives and other members of the congressional, medical, business and philanthropic communities.

For years, the gala has raised awareness of a disease that afflicts as many as 5.3 million people in the United States - a number that's expected to balloon to as many as 16 million by 2050. It's also sought to highlight lesser-known aspects of Alzheimer's, from the toll it takes on caregivers, most of whom are family members, to the early-onset dementia that strikes people in their prime, people like Bandler.

As such, Bandler is helping to promote various Alzheimer's Association initiatives such its "Principles for a Dignified Diagnosis" and "10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's."

These initiatives are particularly timely, given the recent changes to the guidelines for identifying the disease - which should improve earlier detection, a key to people getting appropriate care. It's the first time in 27 years that the definition of Alzheimer's has changed to reflect new medical evidence. The guidelines, developed by the National Institute on Aging and the Alzheimer's Association, divides the disease into three stages - beginning with a phase in which no symptoms have yet emerged, although changes are taking place in the brain that can lead to memory problems, the second stage, and finally to the development of dementia, the final stage.



One of the goals is to improve earlier detection, a key to people getting appropriate care - something that may have been able to help the Bandlers, who were disappointed with the way the initial diagnosis was handled.

"When the internist came into the office [with the news], it was very hard to hear, but we also didn't feel it was done in as careful a way as it should have been," recalled Jane, who was well aware of the disease, given that her mother died from it.

"We knew the testing was done well because we pursued it [and] ruled out any other kind of brain disease. But the way it was reported was offhand. There was no, 'Here's some papers, someone to go to, medicines,'" she said. "It was just a diagnosis with no hope."

To prevent this type of treatment, the Bandlers promote the Alzheimer's Association's "Principles for a Dignified Diagnosis." This includes encouraging medical professionals to engage in practices such as early testing; delivering the news in plain but sensitive language; giving patients tools for dealing with the disease; and working with patients on a plan for healthy living.

As part of being an effective advocate for Alzheimer's, both for improved care for those living with the disease, and for researchers striving for a cure, the Bandlers have taken action at the local, national and international levels.

Shortly after being diagnosed, the family held a cocktail reception at which Don explained to friends that he had the disease, as well as what the association is doing to fight it. He has engaged in advocacy on Capitol Hill, and even met with President Obama at the White House last fall to ensure that the National Alzheimer's Project Act (NAPA) - a national plan to coordinate, evaluate and progressively improve national efforts in research, care and programs assisting the estimated 5.4 million Americans living with the disease - would be signed into law. On Jan. 4, 2011, the legislation, eight years in the making, finally became law.

Ambassador Bandler is adamant that Congress continue with efforts such as NAPA as well as the HOPE Act, legislation introduced on April 6 that aims to improve early detection and diagnosis of Alzheimer's and care for Medicare beneficiaries. As one of the bill's sponsors, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) pointed out that more than half of seniors - some say 80 percent - who meet the criteria for dementia never received a diagnosis. "We can change that. We're going to change that," she said.

Because Alzheimer's moves "in lock-step" with aging societies, according to Robert Egge, vice president of public policy and advocacy at the Alzheimer's Association, the challenge it represents can be expected to grow dramatically in coming years, given demographic trends in the developed world. In the face of this challenge, and the multitude of sobering statistics the association has to underscore it, some might give up hope.

But not the Bandlers.

"We're going to help people to go in the direction they need to get support," they said. "We're not giving up."

Front and top photo: Retired U.S. diplomat Donald Bandler serves as an elected member of the Early Stage Advisory Group (ESAG) of the Alzheimer's Association. He and his wife Jane are actively involved in educating others about the disease.

Middle photo: Senior U.S. diplomat Donald Bandler celebrated the wedding of his daughter Jillian to Neil Parekh six years ago, a couple of years before his diagnosis of early-onset Alzheimer's. From left, son Jeffrey, Don, daughter Jillian, wife Jane, and daughter Laura.

Photos: Courtesy of Donald Bandler

Bottom photo: The Alzheimer's Association National Alzheimer's Gala, held on April 6 at the National Building Museum, raised \$825,000 for the cause. From left, gala co-chair George Vradenburg, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.), host David Hyde Pierce, Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine), Ron Collins, and Harry Johns attend the gala. Retired U.S. diplomat Donald Bandler and his wife Jane (not pictured), both actively involved in Alzheimer's awareness, were also guests at the event. Don was diagnosed with the disease in November 2008.

Photo: Steve Canning Photography

Ladies Take Podium at Annual Conference

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Julie Poucher Harbin

On April 6, Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Congo Faïda Mitifu, who has served in Washington for the past 12 years, was honored as an "Outstanding Diplomat" by Howard University and the Women Ambassadors Foundation - following her fifth speaking appearance at the 16th annual Women Ambassadors Conference.



"This has always been an important event for women ambassadors, as despite progress made, we're still a minority in Washington," said Mitifu, who shared her experience as a female ambassador and the history of women in Congolese politics with an audience of mainly students at Howard University - some of whom had helped to organize the conference.

"Despite progress made in many places around the world, people in general, both men and women, still cannot associate a diplomat job with a woman. Diplomacy remains a man's job," the seasoned envoy said. "How many times have our husbands or companions been greeted as ambassadors even after we have introduced ourselves as such? Society does not process the idea of a woman ambassador. Diplomacy is linked to the ability and art to negotiate, which in turn is confused with physical strength."

Mitifu along with a corps of fellow female ambassadors often speak publicly about their unique roles in the nation's capital - roles that have gotten increased visibility in recent years both because of their efforts and because of the growing number of women leaders, in Washington and around the world. With an influx of female envoys from countries such as Tanzania, Costa Rica and Zambia, the number of female ambassadors in Washington has ballooned to more than 25. Yet that's still a tiny fraction of the total number of ambassadors in the D.C. diplomatic corps.

Which is precisely why Mitifu and her colleagues from Bahrain, Liechtenstein, India, Singapore and elsewhere are frequently found on the events circuit stressing that for women, the job is far from over when it comes to achieving career equality (also see "Women Political Leaders Still Minority" in the July 29, 2010, news column of the Diplomatic Pouch).

Many of those familiar faces joined Mitifu at the Women Ambassadors Conference, which featured speeches by Ambassadors Houada Nonoo of Bahrain, Elena Poptodorova of Bulgaria, Amelia Matos Sumbana of Mozambique, Mwanaidi Sinare Maajar of Tanzania, and Tsebelelo Seretse of Botswana. The chargé d'affaires of the Embassy of Croatia spoke on behalf of Croatian Ambassador Kolinđa Grabar-Kitarović, another popular female ambassador who is preparing to leave Washington this summer to take up the post of assistant secretary-general of public diplomacy for NATO.

Likewise, the women at the conference have enjoyed wide-ranging and, in many cases, pioneering careers. Bahraini Ambassador Houada Nonoo, for instance, who has spoken about women's issues since coming to Washington in 2008, was a founding member of a human rights society, ran a business with her husband, served in parliament, and was ambassador to Canada, Brazil and Mexico. She now counts herself as the first female Jewish ambassador from the Arab world.

Mitifu is the third woman to be appointed ambassador in the history of the Democratic Republic of Congo (the two others served in the 1960s and 1980s) and the first female ambassador to Washington, where she represents a country with a notoriously poor human rights record - especially when it comes to women.

Although Congo's last civil war ended in 2003, after millions had died, the resource-rich country continues to be racked by violence, poverty, lawlessness and human rights atrocities - earning it the dubious distinction as the rape capital of the world.

In 2009, according to the State Department, more than 1,100 women and girls were reportedly raped each month in the east alone, although the true figures are undoubtedly much higher. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that 200,000 Congolese women and girls have become victims of sexual violence since 1998, with relatively few prosecutions.

While many of the armed rapes occur in the east, sexual and gender-based violence is pervasive throughout the Congo, according to the State Department, which has sought to raise awareness of the issue by working

with the United Nations, women-led NGOs and the Congolese government itself.

Congo, equal in size to the United States east of the Mississippi, has made some strides. In 2006, the country held its first democratic, multiparty elections in more than 40 years - electing President Joseph Kabila, as well as a National Assembly and provincial legislatures. The next national elections are scheduled for November 2011.

"This is a very young democracy that needs to be strengthened and we pray and we hope that everything will go well and that it's going to be a precedent for many African countries," Mitifu said. "But for a post-conflict country like my own that has newly embarked on the path of democracy, economic recovery and sustainable peace, breaking with a past that has been burdened by years of corruption and dictatorship, breaking with a culture that has always stigmatized the role of women in politics, is a daunting task." She added that the willingness and ability of women to participate in mainstream political life was "so limited and definitely not mirrored in our electoral list in 2006."

Mitifu said that although the notion of gender equality was embraced in the new constitution that passed by referendum in 2005, women were not successful in introducing the concept into the electoral law. They demanded 50-50 representation on all party lists (a "zebra stripes list") to give women equal footing during the elections, but, she said, men coined the term "leopard list" to mock their demands.

For now, Mitifu explained, women's participation in the political process is mostly confined to informal activities - as active members or founders of women's associations and NGOs, for example.

For Amelia Matos Sumbana, the ambassador of Mozambique, NGO involvement was the perfect entrée into government.



A founding member of the Mozambique Red Cross, member of parliament, and minister of education and culture, Sumbana became politically active at the age of 13 when she joined a student organization that she said helped bring independence to Mozambique 10 years later.

"I was privileged because I had the opportunity to be born in a family that cared about education for girls and boys. We were educated by my parents," Sumbana, a first-time ambassador, said. This was not the common situation, she explained, in a country where 56 percent of the women are illiterate. Mozambique's parliament though has fairly high female representation, with 40 percent composed of women - and a national requirement that 35 percent must be filled by women. And although Sumbana said she had to fight to become a member of parliament, once she won the position, she viewed it as "a platform from which I could fight for other women."

Elena Poptodorova, who is now on her second tour as Bulgaria's ambassador to Washington, also served in her country's parliament, but she took issue with the notion of gender quotas in politics - something the other female African ambassadors in the room clearly support.



"Do we want to be in a certain position, just because we happen to be women? I don't think we want that. We want to be able to compete on the basis of our own qualities, our own advantages, which are far beyond the way we were born. So that's the big battle of today I think," she said.

Mwanaldi Sinare Maajar, the first female ambassador to the United States from Tanzania, responded that quotas are important "to first get the numbers ... so young girls will see them and say, aha, I can also be there." Tanzania achieved a 40 percent female representation rate in last year's parliamentary elections, and the speaker is a woman.

Ambassador of Botswana Tebelelo Seretse, the self-described "new kid on the block," having been appointed ambassador in February 2011, echoed Maajar's sentiment. "When we have the numbers, we will worry about the quality," she said. "If you empower a woman you can empower a nation."

For her part, Congo's Mitifu agrees that the idea of a woman ambassador is unfortunately still a novelty around much of the world, including her own country. She recalled that when it was announced on national television in 1999 that she had been appointed ambassador to the United States, the news sent shockwaves.

"As you know Washington is the most important capital in the world. Who was this woman, people were asking. How could the president appoint a woman as ambassador? To the most important capital of the world?" she said, noting that critics urged the president to send some strong muscle to Washington, instead of a "delicate and fragile" woman, especially because at the time the country was in the midst of civil war. "The president's answer was, 'I love her style and she's doing a great job.'"

Front photo: Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Congo Faïda Mitifu speaks at the 16th Annual Women Ambassadors Conference. Later she was given the "Outstanding Diplomat" award by Howard University and the Women Ambassadors Foundation.

Top photo: Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Congo Faïda Mitifu, right, has served in Washington for the past 12 years and is active in women's issues. She is Congo's first female ambassador to the United States. She is pictured here with President and CEO of the Paley Center for Media Pat Mitchell at an International Women's Media Foundation conference held in March.

Middle photo: Ambassador of Mozambique Amelia Matos Sumbana addresses the 16th Annual Women Ambassadors Conference. Washington is her first ambassadorial post. A founding member of the Mozambique Red Cross, and later a member of parliament and a minister of education and culture, she became politically active at the age of 13.

Bottom photo: Ambassador of Bulgaria Elena Poptodorova addresses the 16th Annual Women Ambassadors Conference. She has served twice as Bulgaria's ambassador to the United States.

Photos: Julie Poucher Herbin

High-Tech Baltic Parking Comes to Bethesda
Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Larry Luxner
 From the tiny country that gave the world Skype comes another 21st-century

innovation: technology that allows you to feed your parking meter via cell phone.

In Estonia - a Baltic nation famous for medieval castles and winter sports - there are nearly twice as many mobile phones in service as inhabitants, giving it a mobile penetration rate of 188 percent, one of the world's highest. But with only 1.3 million people, the market for value-added services is limited.



No surprise, then, that the former Soviet republic is eager to share its expertise abroad. And when it comes to pay-by-cell parking, it happens that Maryland's Montgomery County is now the largest U.S. customer for Estonia's technology.

The transatlantic partnership was unveiled March 31 at a rain-soaked press conference on the roof of a parking garage in downtown Bethesda.

Under a constant drizzle and gloomy skies, Krista A. Tassa, president of the Estonian-American Chamber of Commerce & Industry, showed off the new technology before an audience that included County Executive Isiah Leggett; Viljar Lubi, economic counselor at the Estonian Embassy in Washington; officials of the Maryland Department of Transportation; and local journalists.

To use pay-by-cell, Tassa explained, first-time patrons register for the program once by going online to www.mc.goparknow.com or by calling (301) 830-7074. Parkers set up an account, indicating which credit card will be used to pay for parking.

Step-by-step instructions and phone/text prompts walk the user through what to do next. The patron then receives voice and text messages confirming the start of a parking session. A 35-cent transaction fee is added to the cost of parking - a relative pittance given the convenience it offers and tickets it helps to avoid.

"Pay-by-cell will make it easier for our citizens to enjoy Bethesda and other areas of our county," said Roger Berliner, vice president of the Montgomery County Council. "You will no longer have to worry about getting a ticket because now you can simply phone it in. Resident-friendly improvements like this make Montgomery County an even better place to live and enjoy."

In fact, cell phones can now be used to pay for parking at 5,250 meters in Bethesda. By summer, the program will be expanded to include meters in Silver Spring, Wheaton, Montgomery Hills and North Bethesda - for a total of 11,000 parking meters. That'll make it the biggest program of its kind in the United States, putting it even ahead of Miami, which currently has 6,000 pay-by-cell meters.

"Since launching the pilot in this very garage more than a year ago, thousands of residents, workers and visitors have tried the service," said Tassa, noting that 11,500 customers registered to participate in the pilot program, using their cell phones for about 110,000 parking sessions.

Tassa is also the owner of MobileNOW! LLC, the North American distributor of pay-by-cell technology originally developed by Estonia's NOW! Innovations Ltd. She predicted that Montgomery County will rapidly achieve one of the highest adoption rates for cell phone parking in the country.

"This technology, with its international roots, fits well with the county's international nature, having first been launched in tech-savvy Estonia, whose capital Tallinn coincidentally enjoys a strong sister-city relationship with Annapolis, Md.," she said.

Kallju Ruutli, vice president of product development at NOW! Innovations, says his startup employs 10 people in Tallinn.

"Part of the reason Skype was developed in Estonia is that we're technologically savvy and adapt really quickly," Ruutli explained. "But we're also lazy, so we look for ways to reduce the work. If I can do it from mobile, it's much easier."

Ruutli said parking your car should be the easiest thing in the world - without having to fumble for spare change.

"We must move parking into the digital era. Right now, it's analog," he told the Diplomatic Pouch. "You put in coins, and the system can't differentiate whether you're elderly or disabled, or whether you're entitled to discounts. But with this technology, we can add new levels of service. The city can now differentiate you as a customer."

The new parking system offers many conveniences. Those who use pay-by-cell will get a text message reminder that their parking time is about to expire. Patrons can extend parking time remotely and view transactions online. They can also stop a parking session upon returning to their vehicle, so they only pay for the parking time they've actually used.

Tassa said her company's technology is now present in seven foreign countries: Estonia, Belgium, Great Britain, Macedonia, Slovenia, Spain and Ukraine. Negotiations are also under way to implement pay-by-cell in Canada.

"Right now, cell phone penetration is only 1 percent of the parking market in the U.S., so the potential is huge. The parking industry is slow to accept this, but once they do, it happens very quickly," she said. "Cell phone parking is becoming the rule rather than the exception. It's really becoming the norm."

Front and top photo: Krista Tassa, president of MobileNOW! and the Estonian-American Chamber of Commerce & Industry, left, and Kallju Ruutli, vice president of product development at NOW! Innovations Ltd., stand next to a pay-by-cell parking meter in downtown Bethesda, Md.

Photo: Larry Luxner

Japan and Egypt Praise U.S. Leadership in Crises

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch by Julie Poucher Harbin

During an early spring heat wave in D.C., a handful of foreign ambassadors, various politicians and members of the area's philanthropic, business and media circles got together in the tony Kalorama neighborhood, over spicy chili and cool cocktails, to talk about two of the biggest global developments of the day: the Arab spring and the Japanese disaster.



The April 4 discussion was hosted by the Institute for Education (IFE) as part of its IFE/INFO Public Policy Roundtable featuring Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.), a member of the Senate Committees on Foreign Relations; Commerce; Science and Transportation; Environment and Public Works; Indian Affairs; and Rules and Administration.

The Institute for Education, founded by coach Kathy Kemper 20 years ago to promote political civility and international understanding, regularly holds high-level, invitation-only forums, which over the years have featured more than 200 speakers - including a vice president, lawmakers, Supreme Court

justices, Cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, CEOs, journalists, professional athletes and even a Miss America. The venue for this most recent roundtable was the home of Esther Coopersmith, a UNESCO goodwill ambassador and former U.S. representative to the United Nations.



Ambassadors from

Afghanistan, Monaco, Norway, Cyprus, Slovenia, Luxembourg, Egypt and Japan mingled with guests for the informal gathering to talk politics and policy. Sen. Udall, who was joined by his wife, attorney Jill Cooper, devoted the bulk of his comments to the need for the United States to become a world leader in adopting alternative sources of energy to combat climate change, lamenting the absence of a national plan to tackle it, before turning over the floor to the Japanese ambassador.

"All of us feel deeply in our hearts what you are going through in Japan. We talked tonight about how 50 of the nation's top nuclear radiation scientists are over in your country working with you on what's happening there," said Udall, introducing Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki. "Our hearts go out to you."

Three weeks after the triple whammy of catastrophes hit Japan - the 9.0-magnitude earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant crisis - Fujisaki expressed his gratitude to America, especially for sending 20,000 troops who were working day and night providing basic human needs as well as those 50 nuclear experts giving critical advice to their Japanese counterparts.

"I was telling Sen. Udall that up until now, very frankly, I was underestimating the strength of the United States, I have to say, I didn't know that," Fujisaki said. "Because I was thinking that in the last 30 years after Three Mile [Island nuclear meltdown], the U.S. has made no new nuclear power plants. We have made 29 - number one in the world. So, very frankly, it's a little presumptuous, but I didn't think that we had so much to learn from America, but you have such a huge experience in disposing of the waste materials ... so much equipment and also expertise, so we're learning every day from Americans."



He added: "The American people are really extending so much goodwill and contributions and I'm always saying that we will recover one day. We will because of the resilience of our people, but we are so grateful that American people are standing with us in such a difficult moment. And the Japanese will never forget this."

Across the room, Ambassador of Egypt Sameh Shoukry then spoke about the "transformational" and "trying" period his country was facing following the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak.

"This is certainly a very important and a very dynamic development," he said. "It's a transformational period, a period where we embark upon a new, more inclusive way of government, a greater democracy, protection of human rights, and an opportunity to really reach our potential that Egypt has in a regional and global context."

Shoukry assured that while "there is anxiousness on the part of people trying to get this right," Egypt does have a roadmap that will lead to free and fair elections "where we hope we will proceed to solidify the movement toward democracy and a greater representative government."

He pointed out that every day there are two or three new political parties that are being established in Egypt. "Now totally free, anybody can establish political parties without approval, just an application, and there is a great effort to bring in line many of the legislative aspects of this new Egypt," he said.

While he said Egypt was committed to the course of reform, he warned that the economy was suffering a dramatic loss of revenue as a result of the massive protests - "people are anxious to obtain better opportunities" - and "for a government that is under strain, it is difficult to meet all the expectations and expectations that are rising every day."



Like the Japanese

ambassador, Shoukry had praise for the leadership of the United States in this time of crisis.

"We do rely on our friends. Primarily in the United States, this strategic partnership has been in place now for over 30 years," he said. "What happens and what transpires in Egypt will have a far reaching impact and an impact that directly affects the national security of the United States. We are keen also to demonstrate at this important time, the symbolism of that relationship where the U.S. should take the leadership. As the ambassador of Japan says, we recognize the capabilities and the potential of the United States."

Sen. Udall thanked the ambassador. "I know that there was a great discourse going on between our people and your people while all of this is unfolding and I'm sure it's going to continue."

Front photo: Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) was the headliner at an IFE/INFO Public Policy Roundtable hosted by the Institute for Education at the home of UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador Esther Coopersmith.

Photo: Julie Poucher Harbin

Top photo: From left, Sen. Tom Udall, left, speaks with IFE/INFO Public Policy board member George Vradenburg, center, and Ambassador of Norway Wegger Christian Strommen at a public policy roundtable hosted by the Institute for Education (IFE).

Photo: Julie Poucher Harbin

Second photo: From left, wife of the Luxembourg ambassador Louise Akerblom, Ambassador of Monaco Gilles Noghes and his wife Ellen attend an IFE/INFO Public Policy Roundtable hosted by the Institute for Education.

Photo: Julie Poucher Harbin

Third photo: Ambassador of Japan Ambassador Ichiro Fujisaki spoke to IFE/INFO Public Policy Roundtable guests about his country's earthquake, tsunami

and nuclear accident and praised the United States for its assistance throughout these crises.

Photo: Tony Powell

Bottom photo: Ambassador of Egypt Sameh Shoukry, left, and Ambassador of Norway Wegger Christian Strommen attend a wide-ranging public policy roundtable in which Sen. Tom Udall (D-N.M.) spoke about climate change. Strommen was just back from a trip to the American Southwest and commented on positive developments he sees in the area of water conservation. Shoukry discussed his country's recent political transformation.

Photo: Julie Poucher Harbin

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