

Good News Service #10: March 2009

The philosopher Goethe is quoted as saying: “*Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has power, genius and magic in it!*”

Many of the initiatives described below reflect the boldness of some person or group facing strong opposition, lethargy or long-held traditional ways. Boldness is a good way to start a new season, Spring, and herald a transformational moment in world history.

1. OBAMA SETS NEW COURSE AT THE UN

March 13/09. Inter Press Service. By Halder Rizvi.

United Nations -,After nearly a decade of an often tense and estranged relationship with the United Nations, Washington appears to be taking a much more conciliatory and multilateral approach to the world body.

US President Barack Obama formally restored funding for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) by signing a major spending bill, prompting US officials to again welcome the policy shift on women’s health-related rights.

In January, Obama issued an executive order lifting an eight-year ban on US funding for overseas family-planning groups and clinics that perform or promote abortion or lobby for rights legalisation. We are delighted that the United States will, once again, take a leading role in championing women’s reproductive health and rights” said UNFPA’s executive director, Thoraya Ahmed Obaid. “This is a great day for women and girls.”

<Via www.commondreams.org/headline/2009/03/13>

President Obama has also opened the door to US policy changes in relations with Syria and Iran, on global warming, alternate energy development and a greater respect for science.

2. DOLLARS FROM DIRT: ECONOMY SPURS HOME GARDEN BOOM

March 17/09. The Associated Press, by Gillian Flaccus.

Long Beach, Calif – With the recession in full swing, many Americans are returning to their roots – literally – cultivating vegetables in their backyards to squeeze every penny out of their food budget. Industry surveys show double-digit growth in the number of home gardeners this year and mail order companies report such a tremendous demand that some have run out of seeds for basic vegetables such as onions, tomatoes and peppers.

Gardening advocates, who have long struggled to get America grubby, have dubbed the newly planted tracts “recession gardens” and hope to shape the interest into a movement similar to the victory gardens of World War II.

Adriana Martinez, an accountant who reduced her grocery bill to \$40 a week by gardening, said there’s peace of mind in knowing where her food comes from. And she

said the effort has fostered a sense of community through a neighborhood veggie co-op. “We’re helping to feed each other and what better time than now?” Martinez said.

3. TRACTORS, NOT TANKS, FOR AFGHANISTAN

Ottawa. From Allan Woods, Toronto Star via CCPA Monitor, March/09: Tractors and training, not more troops, are needed to quell the Taliban insurgency and improve security in Afghanistan, says the new governor of that country’s Kandahar province.

Tooryalai Wesa, here recently to meet with to Canadian government officials, says Afghanistan needs advanced agricultural technology, more teachers and more jobs, rather than more military forces. Wesa left his home in Coquitlam, BC last December to take the governor’s post in Kandahar. “We should learn from history”, he says. “The Russians came into Afghanistan with more than 100,000 troops. If they had come with 50,000 tractors or threshers and combines instead of 50,000 tanks, we probably wouldn’t be in the mess we’re in today.”

4. INDONESIAN NGO BACKS VILLAGES VS. PALM OIL

Jan 29/09. Agence France Presse. Pangkalabun, Indonesia.: Deep in the forests of Borneo, a small environmental group is using education and common sense to arm villagers against the devastating onslaught of palm plantations. Yayasan Orangutan Indonesia was founded in 1991 with the goal of saving Indonesia’s endangered orangutans and other wild life, as well as the forests that those species need to survive. Since then, the spread of palm oil plantations into forests and peat lands on Sumatra and Borneo islands have helped to make Indonesia the world’s highest greenhouse gas emitters...and to wipe out habitats of threatened species like orangutans and spotted leopards.

5. EL SALVADOR ELECTS MODERATE LEFTIST PRESIDENT

Mar 15/09. The Los Angeles Times. By Tracy Wilkinson. Reporting from San Salvador, Salvadorans have elected a former TV reporter as the country’s first leftist president, unseating a conservative party that ruled for two decades, and choosing a government that will be dominated by former guerillas. Mauricio Funes, an affable political moderate running on behalf of the FMLN, claimed victory after nearly complete returns gave him a lead that experts said was insurmountable...

Funes called for a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration similar to that which helped end El Salvador’s bloody civil war 17 years ago. With his victory, the FMLN completed its evolution from a coalition of Marxist rebels fighting US-backed regimes in El Salvador’s rugged hills to a broad-based party... UN-brokered peace accords ended El Salvador’s civil war in 1992. About 75,000 people were killed in 12 years of fighting and atrocities by death squads... During the war years and since, around a quarter of El

Salvador's population – about 2.5 million people - fled or were driven to the US, with many ending up in Southern California.

6. GATES READIES BIG CUTS IN WEAPONS

March 17/09. the Boston Globe, by Bryan Bender.

Washington – As the Bush administration was drawing to a close, Robert Gates, whose two years as defense secretary had been devoted to wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, felt compelled to warn his successor of a crisis closer to home. The United States “cannot expect to eliminate national security risks through higher defense budgets, to do everything and buy everything”, Gates said. The next defense secretary, he warned, would have to eliminate some costly hardware and invest in new tools for fighting insurgents. What Gates didn't know was that he would be that successor.

Now, as the only Bush cabinet minister to remain under President Obama, Gates is preparing the most far-reaching changes in the Pentagon's weapons portfolio since the end of the Cold War, according to aides. Two defense officials... said Gates will announce up to a half-dozen major weapons cancellations later this month,, More cuts are planned for later this year after a review that could lead to reductions in programs such as aircraft carriers and nuclear arms, the official said.

7. UN DECLARES DETENTION OF AUNG SAN SUU KYI ILLEGAL

March 24/09. Washington - via Freedom Now. The international tribunal, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, has declared unequivocally that the ongoing detention of Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is illegal and in violation of both Burmese and international law. It also urges her immediate release. An independent and impartial body of the UN Human Rights Council, the Working Group consists of experts from Chile, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Senegal and Spain. This is the first time the Working Group has declared her detention to be also a violation of domestic Burmese law.

Freedom Now supports the Free Burma's Political Prisoners Now Campaign (www.fbppn.net) which aims to collect 888,888 signatures calling for the release of Ms Suu Kyi and the more than 2,100 other political prisoners in Burma. It was on the 8th August, 1988 that the military crackdown killed thousands of citizens and took power from the democratically elected party led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

8. TAIWAN TRIMS MILITARY FORCES BY 20% IN FIVE YEARS

March 17/09. Cui Xiao Xie Yu (China Daily). Taiwan's military will trim its forces by about a fifth by 2014 and shift toward a more defensive posture, the province announced yesterday. The Quadrennial Defense Review, the first defense white paper under leader Ma Ying-jeou, who favours a peace agreement with the mainland, said Taiwan will

reduce its troop numbers from the current count of about 275,000 to about 215,000 over the next five years, strengthening unit combat capability.

The white paper was released following a warming of cross-Straits relations and discussions about possible military dialogues to promote mutual trust. But “there’s still much to be done to further (these) dialogues,” Huang Jiashu, a Beijing-based expert on Taiwan issues, told the China Daily.

9. SOMALI WOMAN HONOURED IN FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY

March/09. Stockholm. From *One World*, UK via the Good News Page, CCPA Monitor: The Right Livelihood Award for 2008 has been given to Asha Hagi, a Somali woman, the co-founder of Save Somali Women and Children (SSWC) and the Sixth Clan. The SSWC works for a safe and sustainable Somalia by helping women overcome poverty, violence and discrimination in their communities. The Sixth Clan was set up to complement the traditional five Somali clans which are all male-dominated.

Asha Hagi has dedicated her life to gaining a better and more peaceful future for her war-torn country. In presenting her with the Right Livelihood Award, the jury said they honoured her “for continuing to lead at great personal risk the female participation in the peace and reconciliation process in her war-ravaged nation.”

10. RUSSIA OFFERS HOPE FOR GLOBAL DISARMAMENT TALKS

March 7/09. Geneva. Associated Press, by Bradley Klapper. Russia’s foreign minister called Saturday for an end to a decade of failure in global disarmament talks, seeking to build on an upbeat meeting with US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. Sergey Lavrov said a statement at the Conference on Disarmament on issues from atomic bombs to space weapons can be broken now that the US Administration is “in favour of multilateral approaches to the maintenance of international security and disarmament”...Lavrov’s tone was markedly different from his last appearance here a year ago when Russia joined China in challenging the US to eliminate space arms, including defensive shields.

On a US-backed proposal to ban fissile material production, Lavrov said Russia “was prepared to start negotiation on a treaty...which would become an important milestone in the processes of nuclear disarmament and strengthening the nonproliferation regime. Lavrov said countries needed to work together for the sake of international security. “We can only solve the problems we are facing now through joint action, by restoring trust in global politics”, he said.

-- A service of the Peace & Social Concerns Committee, Ottawa Monthly Meeting of Friends, 91A Fourth Ave., Ottawa K1S 2L1.

Write to: Murray Thomson, Editor. <mothom@sympatico.ca>