

Sudan: Protecting the freedoms of religion and speech

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By Ambassador Joseph Stafford

October 15, 2012 - When I arrived in Khartoum over three months ago to take up my duties as the Chief of Mission at the United States Embassy to Sudan, I was immediately struck by the friendliness and openness of the Sudanese people and their interest in the American people. I was welcomed warmly everywhere I went. Both my wife and I felt as if we were right at home from the day we arrived.

I began to travel around the country and my first impression proved to be consistent far and wide. The people of Sudan are indeed among the friendliest on Earth. While it is no secret that the official relationship between our two countries is a challenging one, I believe that there is a reservoir of good will in Sudan toward the United States. Despite the bilateral challenges, the U.S. Government works with the Sudanese people on a broad variety of programs that, among other things strengthen food security and agricultural development in Sudan; promote environmental quality and stewardship; support democracy, human rights, peace, and rule of law efforts; increase education quality and access; reduce and prevent disease; and address refugee and humanitarian crises. As an example of our commitment, through USAID, the people and Government of the United States contributed over \$280 million last year to humanitarian programs in Sudan. The United States has also invested over \$410 million last year in the security and protection of the people of Darfur, through its contributions to funding UNAMID. And I am delighted to tout our exchange programs that have allowed Sudanese youth, professionals, and others to travel to the United States to share their culture with Americans and to bring back their experiences to share with the people of Sudan.

Then the violent attacks on our Embassy of September 14 happened. I was stunned. Several thousand, angry individuals came to cause damage to our Embassy over an offensive film the United States Government had absolutely nothing to do with. As Secretary Clinton said, "We absolutely reject its content and message." I am personally disgusted by this crude attempt to denigrate Islam's holy prophet. Those that were offended had every right to be and to make their feelings known, including by peaceful protest, but certainly not through violence. The act of harming innocent people in the name of a religion is surely the greatest possible offense against that religion. This is especially true of a great world religion such as Islam, which has made so many contributions to global civilization.

Two days prior to the attack on our Embassy, on September 12, entirely different sort of demonstrators came to our Embassy. They too were outraged by the film, but they behaved in a peaceful, honorable and dignified manner, befitting their faith. They presented their grievances in a thoughtful letter to the U.S. Government which was respectfully received by one of my colleagues. We in turn passed their letter to senior decision makers in Washington. We firmly believe in the freedom of assembly, as well as in freedom of speech and religious tolerance. The model behavior of the 12 September protestors was a credit to their group and to the faith they represent.

This brings me to the matter of freedom of expression. People cannot enjoy this freedom unless they have both the right to express their beliefs freely and the assurance that they will not face violence or discrimination if they do. When individuals use their freedom of expression purposely to insult others, on a religious basis, a racial basis, or the like, it is right to criticize such speech as irresponsible, misinformed and hateful, and yet recognize at the same time that the speaker nevertheless has the right to express his views, even obnoxious views.

Last year, the United Nations General Assembly embraced this basic truth with a new resolution that recognizes two universal human rights: the right to religious freedom, and the right to speak freely. It is noteworthy that the founders of the world's great religions were strongly opposed by many powerful members of their societies when they first began preaching. Clearly, freedom of religion and freedom of expression are closely interrelated.

The United Nations General Assembly resolution urged governments to combat discrimination and violence, and let all people participate in society no matter their religion. And it underlined the need to do so by respecting the right to freedoms of opinion and expression.

The United States supported the resolution, and its predecessor in the U.N. Human Rights Council, Resolution 16/18, because they were for the first time consistent with our First Amendment and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The resolutions advance religious freedom in a world scarred by violence and discrimination motivated by religious hatred. And they do so while embracing the principle articulated by Secretary of State Clinton, that "the appropriate answer to speech that offends is more speech." One appropriate response to an obscure, crude film that insults a religion is to embrace public discourse about that film in newspapers and online, and to seek out dialogue through other media as a celebration of the positive values and glorious history of that religion

The United States remains committed to the freedoms of expression and religion, and I strongly urge the Government of Sudan to demonstrate that same commitment. I believe it is possible to pursue religious freedom while also combating violence in the name of religion. I also believe that the vast majority of Sudanese people condemn the violence of September 14, remain friendly to the United States, and share my eagerness to see the Government of Sudan take steps along a path toward normalized relations. In closing, let me assure the citizens of Sudan and their government that the United States Embassy expects to reopen soon and once again be at their disposal for assistance, cooperation, and dialog.

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