



Borlaug legacy gives hope for eased tension

Search

Search News

09/19/2014

Associated URL

By Amb. Kenneth M. Quinn

On Aug. 26, in my capacity as president of the World Food Prize Foundation, I had the opportunity to deliver a keynote address at the opening ceremony of the 13th Iran Crop Science Congress, which was held in Karaj, Iran, and was presided over by the Iranian minister of agriculture. I received an unprecedented response.

The theme of the opening ceremony, and the reason I was invited, was a special commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Norman Borlaug, the Iowa native, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and father of the Green Revolution, who was the founder of the World Food Prize Foundation.

Borlaug helped train Iranian scientists in the 1960s on how to grow the "miracle wheat" that he developed in Mexico. The wheat saved hundreds of millions from starvation and death in India, Pakistan and throughout the Middle East. His work on the wheat and his advocacy of biotechnology prompted the Iranian Agricultural Ministry to give him a special gold medal during his visit in 2000 and to organize the special ceremony this year.

Sitting in that auditorium waiting to speak, I thought how amazing it is that one of the very few things that the Iranian and U.S. political leaders might agree on is the deep respect they share for Dr. Borlaug, America's greatest agricultural scientist and the man credited with saving more lives than anyone else.

My mind went back to this past March 25 when the joint leadership of the Congress presided at the ceremony in the U.S. Capitol at which Borlaug's statue was installed in Statuary Hall.

The Agricultural Biotechnology Research Institute of Iran, which organized the Aug. 26 ceremony to honor Borlaug, hopes to acquire a copy of the statue for their campus. I imagined the powerful symbolism of the same statue of Borlaug both in Washington and Tehran.

In my address, I described Dr. Borlaug as part of Iowa's rich agricultural legacy, which included a number of historic endeavors to build relationships with adversaries. I cited as examples Herbert Hoover taking food to feed the children of the Soviet Union at the end of World War I; the Yamanashi Hog Lift which, not long after World War II, took Iowa animals to Japan following a devastating typhoon; and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's visit to Iowa in 1959 at the height of the Cold War, which led to several decades of tension-easing agriculture exchanges led by Iowan John Chrystal.

Next, I recalled being with Dr. Borlaug at the 100th anniversary of the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo in 2001, during which one former Nobel laureate said that people who can stand together to cheer or applaud for the same achievement can find a way to live in peace together.

I explained that this was the philosophy that underscored Borlaug's life and the efforts of the World Food Prize, adding that "confronting hunger and alleviating human suffering can bring people together across even the widest political, religious, ethnic or diplomatic differences." To illustrate my point, I shared a slide of Daniel Hillel, the Israeli irrigation pioneer, receiving the World Food Prize, having been nominated by people from three Arab countries.

I also noted that we were in Karaj, standing together to honor and cheer for Dr. Borlaug for his past efforts. What we needed to do now was find other ways to work together so we could have further reasons to stand together and celebrate other collaborative breakthrough achievements. In that regard, I said I was sure that Dr. Borlaug would be very pleased with Iran's recent extremely positive cooperation with the U.S.-led Borlaug Global Rust Initiative, which is waging the battle to contain the new virulent strain of wheat rust disease, Ug 99, which can wipe out entire fields and which threatens global wheat production.

I then shared with the audience one of Dr. Borlaug's most heartfelt hopes, which I said has special relevance for the Agricultural Biotechnology Research Institute of Iran. Borlaug had told me he dreamed that one day, researchers could discover which gene in rice prevents it from ever developing rust disease, so that, using biotechnology, that gene could be implanted into wheat, forever eradicating wheat rust disease, the scourge Borlaug battled his entire life.

Iran, as a country that grows both rice and wheat, is poised to play a significant role in this endeavor to make Borlaug's dreams come true. To this end, I invited the Iranian minister to select a scientist working on Ug99 to take part in a special panel on wheat at our World Food Prize symposium Oct. 15-17 in Des Moines, and to also send two high school students and two teachers to take part in our Global Youth Institute at that same time.

I concluded by saying that there could be no greater tribute to Borlaug than if we all worked together and succeeded in eliminating rust disease. We could then, as that Nobel laureate had said in 2001, stand together and cheer together for this common great achievement and, hopefully, live in peace together.

I was not prepared for the reaction that followed my presentation. Led by the minister himself, the audience rose and gave me a prolonged standing ovation (mine was the only speech to receive such a response). A cleric representing the Grand Ayatollah who is the supreme leader of Iran, was particularly effusive in seeking me out to pump my hand and praise my statement.

As best I can determine, no other former U.S. ambassador has ever been invited to Iran to speak at a government-organized event. But whatever the case, there cannot be too many occasions since 1979 when a former U.S. ambassador was given a standing ovation in Iran.

In reflecting on my visit, it seems particularly ironic that biotechnology, which seems to bring out such passionate opposition in Europe, India and the U.S., would offer one of the very best means to build a bridge from the U.S. to Iran. In terms of a bottom line, I believe my visit showed the unique role the World Food Prize can play as a neutral forum to which all involved in agriculture from around the globe can come.

My hope is that like Premier Khrushchev's visit to that Iowa farm in 1959 that led to a series of exchanges on agriculture and helped lessen tensions between the Soviet Union and the U.S. at the height of the nuclear threats of the Cold War, the legacy of Norman Borlaug and a visit by an Iowan to address a conference on biotechnology in Iran in 2014 could likewise open a path to help lessen Iranian-U.S. nuclear tensions.

[« Back to News List](#)