

## **Norman Borlaug's Legacy Extends Even to Iran**

by

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On August 26, in my capacity as President of the World Food Prize Foundation, I had the unexpected 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.

The theme of the Opening Ceremony, and the reason I was invited, was a special commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the birth of Iowa's greatest hero, Dr. Norman Borlaug, the Nobel Peace Prize laureate and the 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 and which saved hundreds of millions from starvation and death in India, Pakistan and throughout the Middle East. His work on wheat [a critical crop in Iran] 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 this 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 any other person who ever lived."

My mind went back to this past March 25 when the joint leadership of the U.S. Congress presided at the ceremony in the U.S. Capitol in Washington at which Borlaug's statue was installed by the State of Iowa. The Agricultural Biotechnology Research Institute of Iran, which organized the ceremony to honor Dr. Borlaug, contacted the artist who created that Iowa statue, hoping to acquire a copy of it for their campus. Imagine 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, citing as examples: Herbert Hoover taking food to feed the children the Soviet Union at the end of World War I; the Yamanashi Hog Lift which, not long after WWII, took Iowa animals to Japan following a devastating typhoon; and Soviet Premier Khrushchev's visit to the Garst farm in 1959 at the

height of the Cold War, which led to several decades of tension easing exchanges in agriculture, led by Iwan 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 Dr. 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 Dr. Daniel Hillel, the Israeli irrigation pioneer, receiving the World Food Prize, having been nominated by persons from three Arab countries.

Continuing my remarks, I noted that we were here 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 ( ABRII ). Dr. 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 Dr. Borlaug battled his entire life.

I said that since Iran, as a country that grows both rice and wheat, is poised to play a significant role in this endeavor to make Norman 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 October 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 [given Dr. Borlaug's passion for inspiring young students]. I also pledged to do all that I could to help ABRII obtain a copy of that statue of Dr. Borlaug.

I concluded by saying that there could be no greater tribute to Dr. Borlaug, than if we all worked together and succeeded in eliminating rust disease from the face of the earth. We could then, as that Nobel laureate had said in 2001, stand together and cheer together for this common great achievement (leaving unstated but clearly understood), 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]. Many in the audience sought to congratulate me on my remarks. 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.

I don't know whether any other former U.S. ambassador has ever been invited to Iran to speak (I couldn't find any references to one). 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 terms of a bottom line, I believe my presentation was important in showing 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. Beyond that, I can only speculate on whether my speech and this response might have a small but perhaps not insignificant impact on U.S.-Iran relations.

I hope it might be possible that, like 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.