



# News Release



Office of Public Affairs

U.S. Embassy

## Doctors Hope To Build a Bridge Between Pakistan and U.S. People

(Pakistani Americans go home to discuss medical advances and life in America)

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December 8, 2006

Washington -- Anees Ahsan, a cardiologist in the Washington area, has lived in the United States since 1993. He goes home to visit family members in Pakistan each year. But when Ahsan makes his next visit to Pakistan in mid-December, in addition to seeing relatives he will talk to television reporters, audiences of business people, politicians and everyday Pakistanis about Muslim life in America.

Ahsan said that in Pakistan, there are misconceptions that being a Muslim in the United States means "difficulties." He said when he visits Pakistan, he will not talk about government policy, over which he has no control, but will offer a "living example" of what it is like to live in the United States. "I feel more secure here, than anywhere," he said.

He and several medical doctors will take part in a "citizen dialogue" program developed by U.S. Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes. She met with the group December 7 at the State Department as they prepared for their trip.

Hughes told them that once, when in Germany, she spoke with a Muslim woman who described to her a feeling of "isolation" from other Germans. Because the woman's Muslim friends met regularly at a nearby community center, Hughes asked if she could speak there. The woman was shocked, Hughes said, and replied, "We don't meet with our own government -- why should we meet with yours?" Although rebuffed, Hughes decided to encourage American Muslims to visit Muslims around the world.

This is the second group to visit Pakistan, and another group has visited Kyrgyzstan. "We can trust in our citizens," Hughes said. "No one will suggest what they say; they are free to say whatever they wish and whatever they feel."

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Representing a group of 10,500 physicians of Pakistani descent in the United States, the doctors will attend a health care conference in Rawalpindi and visit with groups there as well as in Lahore and Islamabad.

Ahsan and the other doctors -- Parvez Asmat, Farzad Najam and Abdul Rashid Piracha -- worked in Pakistan after the October 2005 earthquake giving acute care to victims near Muzaffarabad.

The doctors will be joined by Ray Mahmood and his wife Shaista, who together have raised money to help build schools and help children in Pakistan and other countries.

Shaista Mahmood will talk to women at the Women's Chamber of Commerce in Lahore and at Fatima Jinnah Women's University in Rawalpindi as well as meet with women members of parliament, officials in the Ministry of Women's Development and members of women's advocacy groups. She said she will emphasize the importance of more education for Pakistani women. Education not only helps women gain independence, but it also helps them do a good job of raising their children, she said.

"People are the same," Mrs. Mahmood said, adding that women in both countries care about their children and often find themselves acting as "mom-taxis," taking children to school or activities.

The doctors all are members of the Association of Physicians of Pakistani Descent of North America (APPNA), of which Piracha is president. He talked to the under secretary about a health initiative called "APPNA Sehat," a system that brings basic health care to people in Pakistan's rural villages. Piracha said the program immunizes people against disease, teaches the health benefits of cleanliness and works to improve maternity and neonatal care. He asked Hughes to consider helping the group find additional funding to expand the program.

The Pakistani Americans said they explain things about Pakistan and about Islam to Americans often. But they viewed this as a positive role and take it as a serious responsibility.

The Mahmoods recalled that when Mrs. Mahmood first moved to the Washington area in the 1970s, there was only one mosque in the area. When she told people who belonged to a nearby church about how difficult it was to attend Friday prayers, they arranged for local Muslims to use the church on Fridays. "That shows how much tolerance people have in the states," she said.

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