

RAMADAN...A TIME TO SEEK UNDERSTANDING (Fall 2007)



This month, Muslims, who make up more than one-fifth of the world, are fasting and praying to get close to God and attain inner peace. Yet, unfortunately, more than any other time in history, international terrorism is threatening world peace today, and much of it involves the Muslim world.

Poverty and ignorance are often cited as contributing factors to terrorism. But, we also need to recognize the realities of injustice, oppression, and suffering that fuel the hatred behind acts of violence in many parts of the world.

The American pledge is "liberty and justice for all." But what is justice for all? What is justice for victims of terrorism? And what is justice for the powerless who feel that terrorists are actually freedom fighters who champion their cause?

As three billion dollars in American military aid and one-third of all U.S. foreign aid go to Israel year after year, scholars from Harvard and the University of Chicago are calling for our leaders to deliberate the issues of U.S. interests and international justice in a responsible manner. We must understand how the Arab world views justice. We also need to know how Israel views justice. There are no simple answers. Pain and grievances on both sides run long and deep. But understanding their histories and worldviews is a first step towards realistic solutions.

At the 2006 Harvard commencement, the outgoing president lamented, "America today misunderstands the world and is misunderstood in the world in ways without precedent since World War II." The ongoing war in Iraq is a sad illustration of this. What will it take to bridge the gaps of understanding between our worlds? In his much quoted thesis "Clash of Civilizations?" Samuel Huntington appealed to the West "to develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying other civilizations and the ways in which people in those civilizations see their interests."

This past summer, PESI took seventy-seven people, young and old, to Kyrgyzstan and China. Some studied, some taught and trained. Others were in cultural exchange. But all of them made friends as they took time to listen, to share, and to understand one another. They saw how different they were from each other. But they shared a sense of belonging through friendship, making it hard to say goodbye.

In pursuit of understanding, friendship, and peace, our teams had to give up their summer and other priorities. In doing so they were not far from the spirit of Ramadan.