



4TH OF JULY

241st Independence Day of the United States of America



The Daily Star

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

July 4, 2017

AMBASSADOR'S MESSAGE



MARCIA BERNICAT
U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BANGLADESH

Birthdays are an enjoyable occasion. They are a time to remember the wonder and hope of youth while reflecting on the passage of time and dreams fulfilled -- or yet to be realized. There are no straight lines between our hopes and aspirations and their realization. Over time, challenges and opportunities will take us to unexpected places and provide experiences we never imagined.

Today, July 4, is such a birthday; of the independence of the United States. That birth was, like life, painful and messy. There were as many hopes as fears when 13 argumentative colonies embarked on an extraordinary experiment, one that would chart its own history and serve as a beacon to the rest of the world. The nature of the experiment has been unfolding since 1776. It's an experiment that will forever seek fulfillment. That is because as life and time present natural and man-made challenges, a country must adapt to address those challenges. A government that was formed to protect "unalienable rights" that include "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" must adapt to changes that can redefine liberty, happiness or life itself.

On this our 241st birthday we gladly share the fundamental principles that guide us with Bangladesh and the world -- representative government, separation of powers, checks and balances individual rights and rule of law, all of which are enshrined in our constitution.

When Bangladesh achieved liberation 46 years ago, its new government was inspired in part by that American example. You chose to follow a democratic path to ensure human rights, equality and justice for all citizens. As in the United States, that path will never trace a completely straight line. But be assured that on that path, the United States will stand as a stalwart friend, supportive of your independence, celebrating your accomplishments and promoting your development. Both our countries honor diversity, tolerance and progress. Please join me in celebrating the birth of an experiment that is as alive today as it was 241 years ago, one that continues to unfold day by day and unites men and women of good will across the planet.

BY LAUREN MONSEN

WHEN Dania Albaba was a sophomore at the University of Houston in Texas, she wanted to do more to serve her community. So she and a few of her friends decided to launch a local chapter of the nonprofit group United Muslim Relief USA.

Three years later, Albaba and her friends found themselves going door to door to help Texans affected by April's historic flood in Houston that killed eight people and caused tens of millions of dollars in damage.

Albaba was sent with a fellow student, Bassant El-Shazly, to visit the small town of Waller, Texas, about 60 kilometers from downtown Houston. With the town having a population of just 2,400, the young women wondered what kind of reception they would get.

The residents "surprised us with their kindness, humility and love," Albaba recalled. "We came across a lady whose home must have been damaged, and asked if she experienced any flooding. She replied, 'Don't you worry about me. My neighbor has got it a lot worse.' We were blown away by her selflessness,"



Islamic Relief USA volunteers carry emergency supplies for Houston-area flood victims.



Volunteers, including Bassant El-Shazly (left) and Dania Albaba (center), help a flood victim.

said Albaba, now 21, who will start medical school this fall at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

The volunteers worked with a partner organization -- Islamic Relief USA, which coordinates with the American Red Cross -- and assessed flood damage in each household they inspected, reporting their findings to the appropriate agencies.

Volunteers with Islamic Relief USA work on a flood-damaged house in the Houston area.

"What I remember most was the gratitude, smiles and even hugs we received," said El-Shazly, 21, who graduated from the University of Houston in 2015 and will work at an international accountancy firm in the fall. "Most [families] were shocked that anyone thought to visit the areas they live in. They thought they were completely on their own."

The flood victims -- mostly lower-income, minority people -- were not Muslim, Albaba said. "Our neighbors ... were in need, and that's all that

mattered."

With Ramadan in progress, the volunteers are helping in other ways, too. United Muslim Relief Houston's annual Ramadan benefit dinner, held June 11, raised funds for United Muslim Relief USA's health-care projects in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Bangladesh and elsewhere.

Islamic Relief USA volunteers carry emergency supplies for Houston-area flood victims (Courtesy photo)

The Houston volunteers also are planning a Ramadan Project Downtown event, where they'll prepare lunches for Houston's homeless, even while they themselves are fasting.

Reflecting on her visit to Waller, El-Shazly said the experience was life-changing. "Prior to volunteering, when a flood warning came in, we worried about ourselves, our homes and our families. ... I now think, 'I'm okay. Let's go help others who aren't.'"

CELEBRATION OF THE INDEPENDENCE DAY IN THE U.S.

THE founders of the United States knew that independence was something to celebrate. And although U.S. Independence Day celebrations have evolved over time, July 4th festivities remain an important part of American life.

But Independence Day wasn't supposed to be on July 4. In the spring of 1775, after more than a decade of agitation against British policies and the first battles of the War for Independence, the 13 American colonies sent representatives to the first

declaration bore the date of July 4, which the new nation embraced as Independence Day.

Adams was right about the ways Americans would celebrate. Even as the new nation fought to make independence a reality, July 4 was quickly marked by parades, concerts, dinners and fireworks. The 1777 celebration in Philadelphia included music by a band of Hessian soldiers -- mercenaries fighting for Britain who had been taken prisoner the previous winter.

sometimes lasting as long as two hours. "That was kind of the media event of that time," Heintze explains.

Independence Day has also been used by Americans to express dissenting political views. In the years leading up to the American Civil War, leaders of the anti-slavery movement organized events -- typically on July 5 -- to remind people that, for African Americans, the Revolution's promise of liberty had not been fulfilled. And from the beginning of the Civil War, Americans in the South stopped



Continental Congress in Philadelphia. After much debate about severing ties with Britain, the representatives voted unanimously for independence on July 2, 1776.

The next day, in a letter to his wife, Massachusetts Representative John Adams said the date "ought to be solemnized with Pomp and Parade, with Shews, Games, Sports, Guns, Bells, Bonfires and Illuminations from one End of this Continent to the other from this Time forward forever more."

Many representatives to the Continental Congress worried that a vote on independence wasn't enough: They wanted to explain their decision to the world. So two days after its momentous vote, the Continental Congress approved the Declaration of Independence and sent copies throughout the fledgling country. The

Parades to celebrate Independence Day began as military displays but quickly became democratic affairs. The 1788 parade in Philadelphia was more than a mile long, with horse-drawn floats and workers of all kinds marching in costume.

The ways in which Americans mark July 4 have quieted down, according to James Heintze, a retired American University librarian and a historian of Independence Day. Through much of the 19th century, he says, it was a "loud, raucous time," and the noise was considered a show of patriotism -- whether by small boys with firecrackers, miners with dynamite or towns with artillery firing salutes throughout the afternoon.

A major feature of the holiday during the 1800s would have been a patriotic speech by a leading citizen,

celebrating July 4 out of loyalty to the Confederacy. July 4th celebrations did not return to parts of the South for more than 35 years, Heintze says.

Today, most citizens celebrate in much the same ways as Americans did during the 18th century, with parades, picnics, neighborhood parties, outdoor concerts, sporting events and fireworks displays at night. Government offices and many businesses are closed, and workers typically have a paid holiday.

July 4 also remains a day for making a commitment to the country, as the signers of the Declaration did in 1776 when they pledged "our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor" to securing American independence. In many cities and at many historic sites, thousands of immigrants take an oath of allegiance and become U.S. citizens on Independence Day.

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