A Day at the UN - A View from Inside

After 97 applications, 42 students selected, more than 100 UN staff involved, more than 3,500 emails, 26 hours of meetings, a couple of lunches, 24 diet sprite cans, a panel and a packed room, a networking reception, a few internships and a professional position, the UN Studies Program is concluding its first edition of the “Day at the UN” initiative.

The rationale was simple: giving the opportunity to each of the 42 selected students to gain more insight on what it means to work for the United Nations by shadowing one senior UN official for an entire day.

Over the course of the semester, a total of 20 offices were visited from the office of the Secretary General to the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, from UNDP and UNICEF to DPA and UNWOMEN, from UNFPA to the Security Council, from UNCDF to the PBC. During their visits, students had the chance of meeting and attending meetings with senior UN staffers, Executive Directors and yes, the UN Secretary General.

Students and UN staffers shared their experiences during a Panel organized by the UNSP on April 6, 2011, followed by a reception (see below).

Following their individual visits, some students got an internship and one was even offered a professional position in New York.

In this issue of our newsletter, you will find pictures, accounts and impressions of what it means for students to spend a Day at the UN. Enjoy!
Editorial

By Annika Allman

The question, “What’s next?” can be hard for recent graduates. The job market for economic and political development graduates with large loans to repay is not good. The supply of qualified candidates seeking long term, reasonably paid, meaningful positions is far greater than the demand for such candidates. Many graduates are compelled to work just for the cause--i.e., without remuneration.

I was fortunate to enter SIPA knowing that I could return to my previous position in the Canadian government upon graduation. For the past two years, I’ve been certain that I would delay my return only if a very special opportunity presented itself. For me, UNICEF was that opportunity.

My experience with UNICEF began with a day shadowing the head of the Multilateral System Analysis unit (MSA) in February. It was a chance to educate myself on the inner workings of UNICEF for the sake of my work with the Canadian government and for my own career development. It was, I thought, my first and last chance to gain first-hand, informal insights from UNICEF staff. For my hosts, it was an opportunity to hear fresh perspectives, to maintain ties with SIPA’s United Nations Studies Program and to promote UNICEF as an employer of choice.

That day exceeded my expectations. It seemed to draw on all my professional experience to date while adding multilateral perspectives. The team was more open and friendlier than I expected, exposing me to every aspect of their day-to-day work monitoring global trends, strengthening strategic partnerships with other organizations, and continuing to position UNICEF as an advocate for equity in institutions of global governance. I counted myself lucky to have spent the day with MSA, and had no expectations when I applied to a temporary, internal position in the unit. Before I knew it, I was writing the exam, sitting for an interview, and signing a short-term contract.

On Monday, I’ll start my summer in MSA, the most recent in a long series of opportunities that SIPA--and the UNSP in particular--has facilitated. I’m not alone; many of my classmates have turned SIPA contacts, lectures, and internships into meaningful work in foreign governments, at budding NGOs, in respected think tanks, and at the United Nations. The job market for development professionals might be daunting, but the market for SIPA graduates is, I’m convinced, thriving, not least because of programs like UNSP’s “Day at the UN.”
Debriefing the Day: Students (and Hosts) Inspired By “A Day at the UN” Program

By Harriet Riley

It’s no secret that many SIPA students place the United Nations at the top of their ‘dream job’ list. But no matter how many case-studies they read or staff they hear interviewed, it’s impossible to know how a complex organization like the UN works until you see it from the inside. So this March and April, a handful of lucky SIPA students got the chance to experience what it’s like working for the white and blue, as part of a new UNSP initiative called A Day at The UN.

Out of over one hundred original applicants, just 42 were selected. Each of them was then placed with a hosting staff member in a different office or agency. At a panel debriefing on April 6, five of those participants came to share their experiences with an audience of students, faculty and UN staff.

Snezhina A. Kovacheva, from Bulgaria, was placed in the Bureau of Crisis Prevention and Recovery at UNDP. She was particularly impressed by how dynamic her hosts were, despite the fact that the events they were dealing with were unfolding on the other side of the world. “I got a feel for the field even though we were in New York, and I realized just how central fieldwork is to everything the UN does,” said Kovacheva.

Many students were excited to see some very senior diplomats in action. John Burnett attended the Secretary General’s High Level Panel on Global Sustainability, where he crossed paths with President Jacob Zuma of South Africa and Prime Minister Mari Kiviniemi of Finland. “Seeing them in an interactive setting, filling a role where they are participants, was a really interesting experience,” he said. “It showed me what a variety of management tools a leader has to have, like practical finance and teambuilding. It’s not just about making speeches.”

For students, the chance to learn from UN staff provided an obvious incentive to sign up for a Day at the UN, but what motivated the hosts themselves to open up their professional worlds? The second half of the panel addressed this, with six UN hosts from UNICEF and DESA to DPKO and UNDP, explaining why they had decided to participate in the program. UNICEF’s Christopher Fabian had this to say; “we’re not doing this because we’re nice people. We’re doing it because we’re selfish and we’re looking for the next generation of UN staff.” Dominik Zotti agreed: “The Department of Economic and Social Affairs where I work suffers from a lack of visibility, so we have a desire to attract the best talent who might not know about the body.”

Prof. Elisabeth Lindenmayer, who moderated the panel, concluded by asking her guests if they had any advice for SIPA students who still had questions about what life was like working for the UN. Pirmin Real of the DPKO shared his thoughts; “don’t get discouraged by how big the Organization is. Get to know it by looking at the Junior Professional Officer Program, the United Nations Volunteers and internships.” And as Ameera Horriyat from the United Arab Emirates said, getting to know the Organization before applying seems like the best possible thing to do, because “my day transformed my ideas about which department suited my skills and interest best. It made me appreciate how hard UN staff really work, and realize that, if I found the right role, I could do that too.”
Prof. Lindenmayer Leads Research Project On the Potential of Natural Resources in South Sudan for Peace and Security

Professor Lindenmayer led a research group comprised of eight students in a project with the Sudan Desk of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO). Over the course of the semester, the team found that oil, water, and land in South Sudan could become strong drivers of sustainable peace following the accession of South Sudan to the ranks of independent states on the 9th of July. At this historic occasion, the South Sudanese government will have the opportunity to build the institutions, capacity and infrastructure needed to successfully manage natural resources and improve its population’s quality of life. The report investigates the potential for natural resources to promote sustainable peace in South Sudan, analyzing conditions for success, South Sudan’s gaps and challenges, lessons learned from other cases, and options for the UN mission.

Among the bold recommendations, the team suggested endowing the Special Representative of the Secretary General with a leadership role that incorporates natural resource issues, promoting local peacebuilding activities around resource-related issues, strengthening rule of law and governance structures for natural resource management and engaging with the private sector and civil society.

The report was submitted to the Sudan Desk with the view of contributing to the definition of the mandate of the new peacekeeping mission.

UNSP Research Activities

The UN Studies Program continued to expand its research activities during the 2010-2011 academic year. The research projects are conceived by Prof. Lindenmayer in such a way that they match the research capacity available at SIPA with the research needs of the UN. For students these research projects are an opportunity to meet UN officials, conduct field research in places like Haiti, Kenya, Jordan, and Uganda and gain expertise in the issues and challenges facing the UN today.

UNSP research projects have included:

- The Role of Natural Resources in Sustainable Peace in Sudan with the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)
- Analysis of UN Best Practice Reporting with the Peacekeeping Best Practices Section of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)
- Best Practices in Local Peacekeeping Efforts with the UN Department of Civil Affairs
- The Role of the Private Sector in Rebuilding Haiti (DPKO)
- Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding
- The Relationship between Security and Development. The case of Haiti (DPKO)
- UN Management Reform (Congress Research Service)
- The Reform of the Security Council (Working Methods)
- KENYA– Restoring Peace and Security post December 2007 contested elections
- Enlarging the Pool of Troop Contributing Countries for UN Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO)
- Workshop on Mobile Data Collection with field trips to Uganda and the Iraq Country Office (UNICEF)
Margaret Vogt (SIPA MIA ’77): Charting a Career at the UN

By Marie O’Reilly

There were few women, and even fewer African women, at Columbia University’s School of International Affairs in 1977. Margaret Vogt was one of them. Today, she is the Deputy-Director of Africa Division 1 at the United Nation’s Department of Political Affairs.

Originally from Nigeria, Vogt has had a prodigious career since she graduated with a Master in International Affairs. From the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs in Lagos to the International Peace Academy in New York and from the African Union to the United Nations, Vogt has addressed military strategy, conflict prevention and conflict resolution from every possible angle.

Her research has informed Nigerian defence policy and shaped regional approaches to conflict management in Africa. She has participated in UN field missions, in Somalia in 1994 and 1995 and Liberia in 1997. In 2008, she served as a senior political adviser to the Kenya National Dialogue and Reconciliation process.

“Initially I didn’t even think of the SIA,” says Vogt, referring to SIPA as it was known when she was an undergraduate at Barnard. But when she discovered the package of international affairs and international law courses it offered, she knew it was for her.

“I really enjoyed it, and I think I did well,” Vogt recalls fondly, as she talks about classes she took in comparative politics, military strategy, and political strategy. “I will forever remain grateful because the SIA provided me with the opportunity to make a career in this area.”

Today, Vogt says the most satisfying part of her job at the UN is the multilateralism. “It’s both difficult and rewarding,” she explains. “You have to balance so many different interests and parties. The challenge for you as a UN official is to remember to look at issues purely from the perspective of their value for peace and security.” At times, it can be difficult to prevent countervailing forces from getting in the way. With also matters a lot, according to Vogt. “The Director and I see each other as real partners,” she says of her colleague João Honwana in Africa Division 1, “as he says, we clone each other!”

Policy papers, task forces and talking points—these make up some of the daily grind in the Department of Political Affairs. “There are all sorts of quality control points before a document gets to the Secretary General,” says Vogt. “We produce an inordinate amount of talking points. Sometimes it drives me crazy.” But the talking points are necessary, Vogt continues, and besides, “through your work with talking points, you can put your words into his mouth.” Her knowing smile breaks into a grin.

With six children and a husband, Vogt says she didn’t have to choose between marriage and a career. “The key is to have a supportive husband,” she says. “But it doesn’t just happen like that,” she adds, clicking her fingers, “you grow into it as a couple.”

Reflecting on the many stages of her career, Vogt describes her life in chapters. Recently appointed Special Representative of the Secretary General for the Central African Republic, she is about to turn another page.

But first, thinking about her diverse experiences, Vogt offers some insights for SIPA students today. “Life is all about choices,” she says. She repeats the sentence more slowly. “Have I always made the right choice? Perhaps not! But you continue to invest.”

In such a large organization, the personality of the people you work...
Karina Gerlach (SIPA ’82): The View from the Department of Political Affairs:

By José Vericat

Ms. Karina Gerlach, a Venezuela national, born in Caracas, graduated from SIPA in 1982. She spent a year and a half helping establish the Office of the Group of 77 in New York before taking the UN national Competitive Exam and joining the UN in 1984. She has held positions in almost every department of the Secretariat. “Never a dull day”, says Ms. Karina Gerlach about her job at the UN. She is Chief of the Office of the Under Secretary-General of Political Affairs, B. Lynn Pascoe. The Department of Political Affairs is one of the more prestigious at the UN, the equivalent of a country’s foreign service. Her role is basically to assist the USG in discharging all his managerial and substantive responsibilities. That includes a lot of facilitation and often being the bad cop as she is responsible for ensuring the implementation of the USGs instructions. When you meet her you realize why she is there as the phrase “no nonsense” springs to mind. Also the words devotion and passion come across in conversation with her, though twice she almost left the organization. She explains why, and also why she stayed, in this interview.

Karina Gerlach’s personal history is intertwined with that of the UN. The lessons she has drawn from it reflect those of the organization. Her maternal family was persecuted as Jews during the Second World War. On the other hand her father’s family was German, on side of the persecutors. They met in Venezuela where her mother had gone to make a new life after being displaced by the Second World War from the border of Hungary and Slovakia. “People ask me what did you learn from that, and I say, maybe that is why am here”, she says.

Q: Why did you decide to work for the UN?
I come from an international background; I have always been fascinated by multiculturalism and feel very much at home at the UN. SIPA just increased my conviction that I wanted to be with people from all over, do international work and contribute to international causes. In 1974 when I graduated from high school I got a summer job at one of the first big UN conferences outside of New York and I fell in love with the organization and what it stands for. After that when I was a student in Europe I would come through New York on my way home and would look at the flags outside the UN and think “I want to work there one day”. I am very lucky, I got to do what I wanted.

Q: Has the UN lived up to your expectations?
Yes, I have been here for 26 going on 27 years and am still passionate about the place, I can tell you many of its faults, but it is not unlike many other big organizations or bureaucracies, only that we face the additional challenge of having 192 members and therefore bosses. A colleague of mine, who also went to Columbia and ended up in the EU, mentioned to me when they were expanding to 27 countries, “I don’t know how you do it at the UN”. At that time there were about 186 countries in the UN.

But we are also that same number of nationalities working here, and that is one of the most fascinating parts of this work, because you never stop learning. You work with people from all parts of the world and you learn so much out of interaction with them.

Q: What have been the lowest points?
I still feel very privileged to work here everyday, though it has not always been like that and twice I considered resigning. In the end it is important to take a step back, look at things with some perspective and realize how very lucky we are to work here. Sometimes we take too much for granted. In DPA we have hired quite a few people recently and we have 130, 150, 200 applicants for each job posting. That is when you realize that even if you take away 100 applicants because they are not qualified, you still have 100 pretty amazing people who want to work here. For all its faults, in a small way or other, we are contributing. As Dag Hammarskjöld, the UN’s second secretary-general, said, if the UN hadn’t existed we would have to invent it. An organization like this will not be at the vanguard of changes in management culture, we don’t have the flexibility of private enterprise and it comes with time.

Q: What were the reasons you almost quit?
I came to the organizations at a time when demographically because of the “baby-boom” the average age was 49 going up to the higher levels, so there was a real lid on movement in the organization. Four years after I joined there was also the first real financial crisis, positions were cut, and because the average age was relatively low, there were not many people retiring. It was very difficult to move or get promoted. That was when I felt I had hit a glass ceiling.

The second time was when I had gone to the budget division, I will never regret that assignment but at the time I found it awful, particularly because we were offered no training. I hated every nanosecond of it and seriously considered quitting. It was however a very good

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educational experience and certainly enhanced my career. I never want
to do a budget again, but the fact that I understand them and how it
all works is a huge plus.

Q: What position have you enjoyed most?
It is difficult to say because I have moved a lot in the Secretariat and
had some very interesting assignments. I loved working on Sustain-
able Development, being part of the 50th anniversary Secretariat was
a real privilege, and inter-agency work allowed me to get to know the
UN system very well. Clearly it is a huge honor to be where I am now.
Everything political comes through here. We manage a large number
of political and peace-building missions, there are many fascinating
cross cutting issues like conflict prevention, mediation, and then
all the political analysis. My learning curve has been vertical sine I
arrived and there has never been a dull moment. For someone with
my trajectory, having been in so many departments before, though
never a senior political analyst, to become chief of staff in DPA was
rather unusual. I was also the first woman, the first mother and the
first Latino that held this job, so there were a lot of firsts and it was
quite daunting. But it has been absolutely fascinating and a fabulous
journey.

Q: Have you worked in Missions outside New York?
I would have loved to go to the field, but I am one of those people
who have had to juggle my career and motherhood. It has not always
been easy—and yes, I had to sacrifice field assignments. On the other
hand, I have been privileged to have a lot of mobility and that has
been hugely enriching.

I take a nuanced view of geographical mobility because you cannot tell
somebody who is as devoted to the UN as I have been, that because
they cannot move they are of no use to the organization. And yet I
fully recognize how enriching field experience is. And yes people who
move a lot might be fast tracked but we should seek a balance. When
I came to DPA I was invited to lunch by the DPA mothers; there were
about seven—all concerned with balancing their private and public
lives—especially in a place like DPA where we have anything but
regular schedules for the most part.

Q: What is your job like?
A job like this in many ways is 24/7. People get upset when you
check your Blackberry, but it comes with the territory. It is not a nine
to five job. You can just imagine for example somebody that was
monitoring what was considered sleepy North Africa, and suddenly
they are strung out completely with events there since the beginning
of the year. So it is not an easy place for someone with small children
because you never know what is going to happen. You have requests
at the weirdest hour of the night, when, for example, there is a bomb-
ing somewhere and the Secretary General wants a statement issued
immediately.

Q: What skills did you learn at SIPA that helped your career?
When I went to SIPA, it was still very much finding its feet. It is not the
SIPA that it is today. I was privileged to take international law with
Louis Henkin. This was one of the highlights of my whole academic
career, in that cavernous hall we must have been seven hundred
students and yet I always said that if I had an inclination to the UN,
his course on international law was the ultimate confirmation. But the
school didn’t belong anywhere and it was having problems. I studied
Economic and Political Development and there was not even a course
on economic development.

Q: What advice would you give SIPA students?
I always tell young people that basic skills are very important. At entry
level it is about whether you know how to put together a budget, can
write well, organize a good meeting or have lots of common sense.
And you must be passionate, whether it is about a language, a culture
or a part of the world. Now that I am in the phase when I do a lot
of recruitment it comes across—passion or the lack of it. There are
people who tick off all the right boxes and will bore you to death and
there are people who have done things completely the other way
around but when they speak to you, you just know that this is what
they want to do.

Karina Gerlach
War Report from a UNSP Working Lunch

By Greg Hittelman

On a gray Friday afternoon this March, Ambassador Herman Schaper, the Kingdom of Netherlands’ man at the United Nations, opened his embassy to a cadre of academics from Columbia University for a working lunch on the topic of “Libya and the UN.”

The timing could not have been more apposite. It was exactly one month following the startlingly swift decisiveness of Security Council resolution 1970, a quiver of sanctions targeting the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Just the week before, the Council had approved resolution 1973, the no-fly zone that unleashed the current state of international military action.

Unwinding scarves and overcoats, the fourteen guest scholars, lead by Elisabeth Lindenmayer, UN Studies Director and Former Deputy Chief of Cabinet for Secretary-General Kofi Annan, were given a brief tour of the permanent mission’s parlors. Tall and tailored with a sharp white beard, Ambassador Schaper shook hands all round, regaled his guests with a selection of historical anecdotes, then swept them all into the dining chamber.

Facing one another around a repast of wine and delicacies with a distinctively Far East colonial-era sensibility, the guests were challenged to freely engage the Ambassador and his First Secretary of Political Affairs Hanneke Boerma on the Libyan situation.

In a way, this is a war report. The distance between Manhattan and Tripoli is 4,653 miles, but that war zone is closer than you think. Today, the impact of a Security Council decision made in New York on a theater of battle multiple timezones away is registered within moments. And access to the source of a revolutionary people-power movement may be no farther than your Facebook login.

Yet despite that new proximity, information gaps in military decision-making remain an endemic liability. According to Schaper, during the rapid ramp up to resolutions 1970 and 1973, there was a paucity of solid recon about the rebel movement as well as the intentions of Muammar Qaddafi.

Over lunch, Schaper described how, in the corridors at the UN, uncertainty typified discussion of the popular uprising and the regime’s reaction. The “fog of war” seemed quickly to descend, he explained, obliterating any clear view on who and where and how killing and attacks were occurring or being planned. Moreover, noted Lindenmayer, once civilians take up arms en masse against a regime, the former clarity of a PoC norm becomes quite murky: “Who, then,” she queried, “are the civilians?”

Around the luncheon table, the discussion heated up. Concerns bubbled up about the risks inherent in latent Libyan tribalism that might lead to society-wide crackup as seen in Iraq. Would we see a Libya dividing along ancient lines? Questions about the possible role of fundamentalist groups or terrorist influences peppered the discussion.

A thin hand lifted, while conversation around the table continued. Lindenmayer’s eye was caught, and she directed the Ambassador’s attention toward a young doctoral candidate, Najla Abdurrahman.

Abdurrahman explained that she was Libyan, her family was currently there, and that the lack of information about Libya might easily be remedied, by speaking to Libyans.

The room went quiet, forks and wineglasses were set down. “For example, when I started hearing all of the news reports and talk about the tribes in Libya,” said Abdurrahman, “I realized that, I didn’t even know what tribe I was in.” So she got on the phone and called her father. “I asked him, ‘Dad, what tribe are we?’ And he didn’t know either.” Describing a mostly urbanized, modern society inconsistent with standard “tribespeople” depictions by western media, she took to task as myth much of the punditry formulating the Libyan discussion for the world outside. She then proceeded to historically deconstruct the alleged evidence of an Al Qaeda role in the Libyan peoples’ movement.

Ambassador Schaper listened carefully to her analyses. He did not disagree with the assessment: the international diplomatic community needed to be better informed of on-the-ground facts.
At the time, however, with the urgent concern that mass slaughter of civilians might occur, particularly in Benghazi, the Council acted. “The key factors were African and Arab support for action, initially,” said Schaper, and the defection of the UN permanent representative of Libya “made a strong impression”.

The responsibility to protect, the protection of civilians, these mandates driving international action in Libya may have saved many lives, and will certainly also deliver many to death. During the working lunch, Lindenmayer warned, “Even those people you want to protect, you may end up killing… there is nothing clean about this.”

In the midst of crises, faced with insufficient facts to service decisionmaking at the UN, said Schaper, “it’s not all rational, and at a certain moment, the momentum takes over.”

Of late, these same questions regarding tribalism and Al Qaeda in Libya continue to be repeated by policy experts, pundits and intelligence reports. Just days after the embassy lunch, “flickers of intelligence” that Al Qaeda might have a covert hand in the matter were cited by Admiral James Stavridis, NATO’s supreme allied commander for Europe.

One day before the writing of this article, Luis Moreno-Ocampo, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, announced he will call for the arrest next week of three Libyan leaders. The charges will be murder and persecution against the anti-government movement in Libya. The names of the suspects have not been released as of the date of this writing, but Qaddafi’s name is sure to be included.

Ambassador Schaper has been a vocal advocate for UNSC mandates to prioritize the protection of civilians. His recent official statement during the Security Council’s May 10 open debate on the theme of “Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict” included emphasis on “robust implementation” of PoC in UN peacekeeping operations. Also notable were his comments on the information needs of the Council. In that debate, the Ambassador welcomed more regular and rigorous intelligence input by the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) and lauded the Secretary-General for “putting into practice his promise to inform the Council ‘about what it needs to hear, not what it wants to know.’”

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**UNSP Panel Series**

**UNSP Panel: The Crisis in the Middle East: Uprising and Trends**

By Miriam Shahrzad Schive

**UNSP hosted a panel with:**


**H.E. Mr. Abdullah M. Alsaidi, Former Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Yemen to the United Nations, and Senior Fellow at the International Peace Institute**

On Wednesday, April 13, 2011, the UNSP hosted an event on “The Crisis in the Middle East: Uprising and Trends” with H.R.H. Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid Al-Hussein and H.E. Mr. Abdullah M. Alsaidi. The purpose of this panel, which included two prominent Arab Ambassadors, was to give SIPA students a chance to look beyond the headline news and to dig deeper into the reasons behind the ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings.

Mr. Alsaidi first pointed out that while there are circumstances that are unique to each country – be it Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain, or Yemen – there are also some fundamental commonalities. At the heart of all of the uprisings are the crises affecting international economic and financial markets and food prices, but underlying these are decades of increasing inequality between the rich and the poor, and failing or lacking governance systems. Alsaidi highlighted that many governments across the Arab world have focused on building up strong security forces,
rather than building strong civilian institutions. Weak separation of branches of power leads the legislative and judiciary to rubberstamp executive decisions. The citizens of these countries are left without a platform to voice their complaints or questions about government decisions. Alsaidi further argued that much of the government’s inability or unwillingness to adapt is to be blamed on the length of time that Arab leaders have been in power: “The longer you stay, the less you are willing to deal with problems.” In addition, the citizens of these countries feel they have no voice, no freedom and, most of all, no dignity or respect. The lack of dignity, Alsaidi said, is what made the Tunisian fruit seller, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire and what sparked the uprisings. The response, therefore, must be to “start democracy now.” According to the Ambassador, the idea that the Arab world might not yet be ready for democracy, is “a lame argument. Democracy is not particular to any one society. It is not that some people are born democrats, while others are not.” Prince Zeid Al-Hussein, similarly, stressed the point that, in addition to rising food and oil prices, weak or missing institutions and poor leadership are the core problem facing many Arab governments today. The events of the past few months have “lit a flame and inspired people across the Arab world” without regard to borders or the status quo. The governments were caught by surprise, but reacted in different ways: “the unwise leaders thought you can deal with this phenomenon with conventional orthodox measures, the wise knew this was a different rumbling and that we had to be much more attentive and try to analyze and address the situation properly, and the wisest were those who recognized that people simply wanted freedoms to express themselves and to participate in the governance process.” However, he cautioned that we should not think sweeping democratic changes will resolve these problems over night. “The answer to the question of ‘are we ready for democracy’ is much more complex.” There is a deep cultural conflict within Arab societies, between the conservative mindset that the status quo should be maintained, and the more liberal mindset that feels deep reforms are necessary to address this current crisis. Within the government this creates “a dilemma between those in the country who feel old methods still work, and those who feel new methods are needed for new problems.” In Al-Hussein’s views, these questions need to be addressed in order to decide which reforms will be useful to counter the instability and volatility of the world economic and financial crises. Wondering aloud, he asked, what will happen if in six months or a year down the road, new Arab governments are in power, but food and oil prices continue to rise? “How will these nascent states react, where will this lead the global economy and who is going to rescue it?”

During the Q&A session, one student asked Mr. Alsaidi, what triggered his resignation from the Yemeni Foreign Ministry. Recalling events that took place in Yemen on Friday, March 18, 2011, Mr. Alsaidi explained that he decided to resign when he heard the news that trained militia had shot and killed 52 and injured at least 100 civilians on their way home from Friday prayers. This event, he said while holding back tears, made him realize that he could not stand before UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and attempt to “justify what cannot be justified.” As noted by Professor Lindenmayer, Mr. Alsaidi’s actions exemplify the type of leadership that the world needs so badly. True leaders are people who are willing to uphold important values and norms, no matter what the personal cost may be. Ambassador Al-Hussein also made a call for global leadership. Quoting a former Indonesian Ambassador, he recounted an anecdote about the world as a cruiseliner: the United States has the largest state room on the top deck, other developed and developing countries have rooms on the lower decks, the least developed are in steerage. Everyone tries to keep their own household clean and protect it from unwanted intruders and hopes in time to move up to higher decks. But with everyone focused on their own property, who is thinking about the entire ship and where it is heading?