NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Loving our enemies: The people of Iran

John Dear S.J. | Mar. 17, 2009 On the Road to Peace

A delegation of 20 American peacemakers planned to visit the much maligned nation of Iran in late February. Only six received visas. Among these were David Hartsough and Franciscan Fr. Louie Vitale. They returned brimming with fondness, hope and heartening stories.

David, the delegation leader, is a long time Quaker peacemaker who worked with the American Friends Service Committee for 18 years and co-founded Nonviolent Peace Force, an international project that places trained nonviolence workers in conflict situations. He currently directs Peaceworkers, an organization that supports nonviolent movements around the world.

In Iran, the delegation met people from all walks of life, merchants and professors, students and politicians, families and clergy, and the report of their sincerity by no means surprises me. David said: ?The Iranian people are friendly, beautiful, kind and generous. They love the American people and would like more people to people contacts and exchanges. To pretend we?re enemies is sad.?

But apprehension and anxiety hang on the air ? so much so that only about 300 Americans are in Iran at any one time. Such a climate of tension makes delegations like David?s a balm for worry and fear.

And more than a balm. The delegation shines light on American hypocrisy and offers a hand of reconciliation. American relations with Iran are checkered indeed.

?tIn 1953, the CIA overthrew the democratically elected Iranian government headed by Prime Minister Mossadegh.
?tIn 1988, the U.S.S. Vincennes shot down an Iranian civilian airliner. All 290 aboard died, but no apology from the U.S. was ever issued. The ship?s captain, William Rogers, later received the Legion of Merit.
?tThe U.S. propped up the rule of Iran?s Shah?a brutal and repressive ruler of his own people.
?tAnd in Iraq, the U.S. propped the rule of Saddam Hussein as he waged war against Iran between 1980 and 1988, unleashing the obscenity of chemical weapons.
?tAnd as for the red herring of nuclear weapons, the U.S. practices a glaring double standard. More than 10,000 sit poised in our arsenal. Israel keeps its own nuclear arsenal under U.S. defense. But Iranian aspirations bring down an unrelieved barrage of American threats. Namely, as done to Iraq, so to Iran ? a threat maintained despite that, in Iraq, not one nuke turned up. Of interest there, as we suspected, were the rich fields of oil.

For all this, David takes the United States to task. ?We were amazed to learn that Iran, a nation of 66 million, has not attacked another country in the past 200 years. Unfortunately, we cannot say the same for our country. Being in Iran, we were struck by the arrogance of our own country. Iran is an ancient country and culture and a relatively young U.S. is trying to tell Iran how to act ? as if it were relating to a naughty child. This does not go over very well in Iran.?

Iran?s culture is nearly transhistorical, reaching back some 2,500 years. Primordial and profound are the customs, artifacts, architectural lines. The mosques, museums and universities ? the wisdom of the poets ? they

all bespeak an ancient reverence for life.

The delegation was gladly received in Esfahan, Shiraz, Tehran the capital, and Qom, the religious capital, where the major Muslim seminary is. By contrast, they were less warmly greeted at the airport. There authorities inked their fingers and imposed harsh questions ? all part and parcel of a paranoid government.

Such treatment and more is visited upon all manner of Iranian activists: student organizers, human rights workers and women advocates, such as Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi. (Ebadi is a brilliant lawyer and one of the world?s leading activists. I spent a memorable evening with her in Denver a few years ago.) Iranian activists are harassed, in part because of rampant suspicion about shenanigans by the United States.

But the common people received the delegation as a sign of hope. They met with wounded veterans of the Iran-Iraq war. ?What was so powerful,? David said, ?was that no one spoke of revenge.? They talked rather of building a new world, a world where weapons are banished and no one suffers anymore the anguish of war. Some in Tehran are building a peace museum.

David puts an end to the tendentious media image. ?Contrary to the image many in the U.S. have of Iranians as terrorists running around with missiles in their pockets and threatening other countries, we found that almost every Iranian we met has a passionate desire for peace.?

At the moment, Iran is surrounded by war, all of it instigated by the U.S.?to the west, Iraq, to the east, Pakistan and Afghanistan. In this agitated sea of war, Iran is an island.

?Iran,? said David, ?could be very helpful in helping bring peace to Iraq and Afghanistan. More, Iran and the U.S. could work together for a genuine peace between Israel and Palestine. Together we could help create a nuclear-weapons free Middle East. From my experience, the Iranian people and the American people would fully support our governments in moving from confrontation and threats to negotiations and peace. We could rid the world of all weapons of mass destruction if we worked together.?

Willingness to work together sprang up wherever David went. In a park in Esfahan, a man approached him smiling, pointing at David?s T-shirt. It bore words of conciliation: "Peace with Iran? in English and Farsi. The man said, ?Thank you for your message. We are all children of one God under one sky on the same earth. We need to see ourselves as brothers and sisters and friends, not as Iranians or Americans or Muslims or Christians?or enemies.?

David?s new friend was named Hamid, a fireman at the Shiraz airport. He and his family were in Esfahan on holiday. And the conversation grew animated. ?All religions teach us to love one another,? Hamid said. And he talked of the peaceable influence in his culture of the Sufis and the poet Hafez. ?I in turn,? said David, ?encouraged him to read Mahatma Gandhi.?

Presently, Hamid?s family drifted toward him from the playground, curious about this visitor from America. ?I immediately felt deep love for them,? David said. ?I took a picture of Hamid with his family and they took one of me with Hamid.? A brief encounter to be sure, but when the threat of violence hangs on the air, a gesture of peace between like-minded people forms deep brotherly love. ?I wish everyone could have this kind of experience across the barriers of nationality, religion and enmity by our governments, and discover our common humanity.?

They said goodbye and David moved along, through a busy bazaar. Out of one shop a man emerged, asking, ?Where are you from? Where are you from?? When he heard America he offered a big smile. ?Welcome to Iran,? he cried. ?We are very glad to have you here. We would like many more people to come visit us from America. But don?t bring your guns!?

?Yes,? says David, ?we need many more Americans coming to Iran, and many more Iranians coming to the U.S.? Only then can we know and understand one another. Only then can we ?gain a greater appreciation of one another as people, and learn each other?s culture, history, and viewpoints.? A citizenry that loves its ?enemies??enemies more often than not foisted upon us by our government?will agitate that the government engage in diplomacy and in building trust. And conversely, agitate to ?leave our guns and threats of war at home?or even better, in the dustbins of history.?

The International Atomic Energy Agency recently confirmed a U.S. intelligence report that since 2003 there has been no sign that Iran is developing nuclear weapons. The fact gains credence by the attitude of Iranian?s Muslim leaders. They tell David, ?developing or using nuclear weapons is immoral and therefore Iran would never develop them.?

I pray that religious leaders in America embrace a similar attitude. Of course, some do, rare as it is. Among the few is Fr. Louie Vitale, 77. He told Muslim leaders there that to be in solidarity with them, he has kept the Ramadan fast every year since 2001. This bit of news moved them deeply. As he continued, they grew amazed. Louie went on to tell them of his two years in jail for opposing U.S. warmaking and the adoption of torture.

Here was a noble history coming around again ? a Franciscan, speaking peace to Muslim sisters and brothers, in glowing emulation of St. Francis himself, who during the church?s infamous crusades offered friendship to the feared and maligned sultan.

The two weeks came to a close, and David offered an appeal to Americans. ?I hope all people will contact President Obama and their members of Congress and encourage them to move away from confrontation and threats against Iran and to a commitment to resolve all our differences through diplomacy, negotiation and real respect for one another.?

And he assures us. ?People on both sides would support this.? He offers a the prospect of real hope. Here is our chance to ?move from the Axis of Evil to the Axis of Friendship, and leave the old politics of confrontation and war behind and replace them with a new politics of peace and friendship.?

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David Hartsough?s work can be seen at: www.peaceworkersus.org and www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org. For information on Fr. Louie?s upcoming national speaking tour, see: www.paceebene.org. St. Anthony Messenger Press has just published, John Dear On Peace: An Introduction to His Life and Work by Patricia Normile. John also has two new books, A Persistent Peace (his autobiography, from Loyola Press), and Put Down Your Sword, (Eerdmans) a collection of essays on nonviolence, all available from Error! Hyperlink reference not valid. On April 24-26, John will lead a weekend retreat on the lives and lessons of Gandhi, King, Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton at the Kirkridge retreat center, see: Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.. For info on his books and speaking schedule, see: Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.

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