Today, “Observed” Martin Luther King Day, I am penning my first column for 2009 and want to touch on a few topics.

First, Happy New Year to you all. This may be stale for the Christians among us and especially for the Jewish and Muslim members, but it’s actually a bit fresh for those from Vietnam (the year of the buffalo) and China (the year of the ox). Their New Year celebration starts January 26. “The year of the ox/buffalo is predicted to be an exciting year, full of growth, stability and accomplishments, as the elements of Earth and Water come together.” As this is also the year of Barack Hussein Obama, such reading of the almanac underscores the hope that is vibrant, not only in this nation, but throughout many nations on our planet earth. Hope that builds on the gloom of a global economic, political and ecological nightmare. With the element of water you make peace, say those from the Middle East. Water purifies, water is used for blessings; the symbol of water is universally related to life and suspensibility. It bodes well for those of us who yearn for smart politicians who understand that fair trade, commerce, freedom, culture and happiness are all dependent on peace and peaceful deliberations.

Second, it seems that the atrocities of the Gaza idiocy (an eye for an eye leaves everybody blind, and over there it seems that all leaders are blind or have blinders) have come to a temporary halt. I am too conflicted and too upset to express my opinions in the context of the UNA-GP, but I did find it hopeful that reportedly the inauguration of Obama on January 20th played a major role in that decision. Let’s hope that Hillary will bring a lot of cool water to the region on January 21st. There is absolutely no need to bring more weapons or other forms of the element of fire.

Third, our board met on the 5th of January and we addressed several issues that need to be worked on in the coming year. We intend to work more in the form of projects and events, befitting a small regional chapter, and let go of a full-fledged strategic plan and respective vice-presidents. The national headquarters in Washington DC/New York City will provide the strategic overarching plan for all chapters. For 2009, we intend to work on establishing a working relationship with the public libraries and those school libraries that are interested in building a UN-Corner. We also need to embellish our website and spend some money on design and maintenance. How we are going to accomplish that befalls to Damon Kletzien, who is currently managing the web affairs. There has been hope that the UNAUSA would expand its web capacity in such a way that the local websites could find a full-service link/space within it, but that hope has become quite old, if not cold.

Fourth, you will find in this, two
SURAYA PAKZAD will visit Philadelphia

We got word from Aldo Magazzini of Traveling Mercies that in March he will host Suraya Pakzad, founder of Voice of Women, and winner of the 2008 Women of Courage Award from the US State Department. Suraya was in Philadelphia last year as well and has made a deep impression on those who heard her story.

UNA-GP intends to make the most of Suraya’s visit, with a specific focus on International Women’s Day, March 8. Members Anastasia Shown, Karen Young, Ella Torrey and Connie Hoe are working with other organizations and groups for speaking and other events. In the February newsletter we will provide more information. We downloaded the following article about her.

**Suraya risked death to teach girls in secret**

( Irish examiner, nov 18, 2008)

MARRIED at 14 and a mother at 15, Suraya Pakzad seemed certain to follow the path of most women in Afghanistan under the Taliban regime, facing a future without a vote, a voice or a choice in her destiny.

But Suraya had two advantages — her own plucky spirit and a husband who was far more free-thinking than his peers. In between producing five more children, Suraya was able to keep up her education, graduate from college and get a job at the University of Kabul.

As the Taliban’s grip tightened, however, schooling for girls was banned so Suraya began holding classes in her home, eventually creating a network of secret home schools for 300 girls even though she risked death for defying the law.

She looked forward to the US-led invasion that toppled the Taliban regime in 2001. “I said, all will change now. Women will be free. And then nothing happened.”

Seven years after “liberation”, extremists share the Afghan parliament, warlords command the streets and Islamic fundamentalism controls the home. Maternal mortality rates are among the world’s highest, only 21% of women are literate, 57% marry aged 15 or younger and 87.2% report suffering some form of physical, sexual or psychological abuse.

“A woman who asks for a divorce from a violent husband may be refused by the court because it is her duty to stay with her husband until the end of her life. If she does get a divorce, her family will cut her off because of the shame.”

Not surprisingly suicide rates among women are high, with many victims resorting to setting themselves on fire. It was against that background that Suraya, 38, founded Voice of Women (VOW), Afghanistan’s first women’s organization in 1998.

She and her small workforce run a shelter for women escaping violence in Afghanistan’s third-largest city, Herat, and offer legal advice and counselling services that easily deal with 250 cases a month. Her shelter is slandered as a brothel and Suyara receives regular death threats but, with the help of donor funding, including some from Ireland which is channelled through Christian Aid, and the support of international recognition, she is determined to continue her work.

“I want to create a new path for women, not only in Afghanistan, but anywhere women are forgotten. That is my dream.”

A message from NEW YORK

You can now register to attend the United Nations Association Mid-Atlantic Conference Year of Change: New Prospects for America at the United Nations, to be held on Feb. 6. Registration is free of charge.

In addition to those listed in the current flyer (see link below), Ambassador Maged Abdelaziz, the Permanent Representative of Egypt to the UN and British Deputy Permanent Representative Ambassador Karen Pierce are confirmed for the Peace and Security panel. Jeffrey Laurenti of The Century Foundation, and Board Member of UNA-USA, will moderate that panel.

Please note a name correction to the flyer: Heather Kendall-Miller, Athabascan, Native Village of Dillingham Alaska Conservation Foundation, is a panelist.

The Conference will take place from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in Conference Room 3 at the United Nations. Registration begins at 9 a.m., and you should arrive early to go through UN Security at the white tent at 46th St. and First Avenue. Bring a photo ID; lunch can be purchased at the UN or nearby restaurants and coffee shops.

You must register by Feb. 1 so that your name can be placed on the United Nations security list.

You can link to on-line registration at www.unasouthernny.org

Ambassador Bill Luers will give a welcome, as this meeting will also serve as Members Day for UNA members.

The conference room seats over 600, so you are welcome to bring groups, but all must register on-line individually (Or perhaps one person can be designated to enter the registration for all members of a group, especially if all don’t have access to the internet.) Please feel free to pass this email on to others.

Jeanne Betsock Stillman
UNA Middle Atlantic Representative to the Council of Chapters and Divisions Steering Committee and Vice President, UNA Southern NY State Division
It was COLD, but marching for Peace warms the heart.  

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Saturday, January 17th, there was huge excitement in Philadelphia. Large groups of people were talking in loud voices and using energetic body language to give voice to their hopes for a great uplift. Indeed, Obama’s train was fun for some, even a few remembered that we were between the actual and observed birthdays of MLK, but the masses and their media had the priorities right. GO, EAGLES, GO.

Now, with the Eagles defeated, walked from 13th Street and Spruce to the Amtrak station. We experienced the full wind tunnel effect of the skyscrapers. It was cold, cold, cold. But who cares when you just think for one minute about Martin Luther King and his teacher Gandhi, about Iraq, Gaza, Congo, Georgia, Kashmir, Somalia, Sri Lanka, Columbia, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Mexico and the ghettos and reservations of the USA. Peace is much more than the absence of armed conflict. Peace is a state of affairs where human rights are fully executed and recognized, where conflicts are discussed and handled in civilized ways, where weapons are for protection only, ARE FOR PROTECTION ONLY.

When we reached the station, we found a few others who had banners and such. After that, we each went our ways. I went inside to get warm and found two UNA-GP folks huddled together, sipping coffee and having a good time celebrating OBAMA’s inaugural train ride. After that, it was off to the Fairmount Water Works, where students and teachers were deliberating about the water problems in the world. Water is peace. There were students. There is hope.
Dear Mrs Obama,

I missed you yesterday at the 30th street Amtrak station in Philadelphia. So did a lot of other well wishers, who looked at police officers, horses, each other and decided to keep smiling about the prospect of your husband’s presidency.

I wanted to speak to you about an issue in the hearts of many members of the United Nations Association in America, and many members of such associations in other countries. It is an issue also shared by members of other groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. That issue refers to the shoes of Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor, who was able to get the Universal Declaration of Human Rights established as a guiding principle for all political action, whether adhered to or not.

Franklin was no exception, nor will be your husband.

Eleanor Roosevelt worked long and hard, standing in shoes that could carry her from lectern to lectern and from country to country. She had long and narrow feet, according to her niece. It seems that you do too. At least, that is what I conclude from the picture I saw.

You wear sensible shoes too.

Your husband likes to take his inspiration from Abraham Lincoln and for good reason. And he has a fondness for footwear as well. It seems that the secret service cannot pry his blackberry from his fingers, nor his shoes from his feet.

As you start your role as First Lady, may I beg you, madam, to take your clues from the legacy of Eleanor Roosevelt. Her shoes are hard to fill, but anatomically as well as academically, mentally and consciously, you seem to be able to succeed. The whole world is watching and wishing you well.

- Christiaan Morssink, UNA-GP President

UNAUSA adopts Advocacy Agenda

Restoring US Leadership through International Cooperation: An Advocacy Agenda for 2009

With the start of the new year, the United Nations Association of the USA (UNA-USA) released a new blueprint for improving America's role in the world and strengthening US-UN relations. The 2009 Advocacy Agenda outlines the Association’s policy priorities and provides concrete outcome goals for each issue, as well as specific actions that UNA-USA members and leaders can take to help promote the agenda.

The 2009 Advocacy Agenda covers the following six priority issues:

1) Strengthening the US-UN Relationship;
2) Advancing Human Rights and International Justice;
3) Renewing the United Nations;
4) Building International Consensus on Climate Change;
5) Achieving the Millennium Development Goals;
6) Promoting Arms Control and Disarmament.

The Board-approved Advocacy Agenda was developed through consultations with a number of UNA-USA groups, including chapters and divisions from around the country, the Council of Organizations and the National Council.

With a changed political landscape that includes a new administration and many new members of Congress, there are greater opportunities for educating policymakers about the importance of working collaboratively through a strong United Nations to find effective solutions to today’s shared global problems.

To find out how to take advantage of these opportunities, read the 2009 Advocacy Agenda: go to: http://www.unausa.org/site/pp.asp?c=fvKR8MPJpF&b=328637

Starting with the February newsletter, UNA-GP will publish a free-standing paragraph of the Advocacy Agenda.