Civil Unrest Affects Libraries in Cairo, Egypt

By Henry Mendelsohn

Editor’s note: Mr. Mendelsohn is an Information Resource Officer with the United States’ Department of State’s Foreign Service. His most recent post was in Cairo, Egypt, until the recent violent outbreaks. He has safely returned to the United States, and shares his story and impressions of the trials and opportunities Egyptian libraries now face.

“Please gather your valuables and stand by to be evacuated. You can bring one bag to check and one carry-on per person.” This was the message we received from the U.S. Embassy over the phone as we heard gun fire crackle outside our building. Although the demonstrations in Cairo had started peacefully they took a turn for the worse after a couple of days when the uniformed police and plains clothes police disappeared from the streets. Police stations were burned and the police ran away. Prisoners broke out of the prisons and took the guns the police left behind. The large department stores and malls in our neighborhood and elsewhere were looted and burned and there was at least one attempted – but unsuccessful – break-in at a residential building around the corner from where we lived. That night we barricaded the door to our apartment and some of our neighbors stayed up all night.

The next day the Egyptian army took control of the streets and moved tanks and armored personnel carriers into many of the major intersections and started arresting and in some cases shooting the criminals and looters. One young policeman was hiding in the basement of our building and fortunately a couple of plain clothes police showed up to keep an eye on our building and the entrance to Cairo American College - the international school where my kids and most other expat kids went to school. We sent them food and blankets so they could spend the night in our building and we felt a bit safer at that point. However, we heard gunfire around the clock for the next four days prior to being evacuated.

The evacuation itself was a very long day. My wife, two children and I were taken to the airport along with other embassy families and on the way we counted over 20 tanks on the street. There were thousands of people at the airport terminal waiting for State Department chartered flights that took embassy families and other American citizens to safe havens in Europe. State Department counselor officers and security officers did a marvelous job of keeping order amidst chaos and getting everyone on a plane and out of Egypt. We eventually arrived in Athens and later travelled onwards to Washington.

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Message from the Editor

If you had access to news last January, I am sure you followed the uprising of the Egyptian populace to overthrow the former President Mubarek. Amidst all the reporting, the libraries were usually overlooked. This issue’s main story is from Henry Mendelsohn, an IRRT member who works as an Information Resource Officer for the Foreign Service of the U.S. Department of State, last posted in Cairo. Mr. Mendelsohn was evacuated from Cairo, but he remains in touch with colleagues there. He shares his impressions of leaving Egypt, and information about the looting and destruction of two public libraries in Cairo and Giza.

One notable exception to the lack of news coverage about libraries in Cairo was an interview by CNN with the Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, about the youth of Alexandria massing to protect the Library against looting and destruction. Included in this issue is a reprint of the open letter of thanks from the Director to the “youth of Egypt” as a reminder that many people value libraries. Even in the midst of a civil uprising.

This issue also includes many items of note for IRRT members. The programs for IRRT and IRC during ALA Annual are listed; note that locations are not included and attendees are advised to consult the final program. Ms. Sha Li Zhang, current Chair of the International Relations Committee, submits a report on the actions of the IRC at their meetings during Midwinter. Also, this year’s winners of the Bogle-Pratt Award and the John Ames Humphry/OCLC Forest Press Award are presented. Congratulations to Madeline Mundt and Sally Tseng, respectively!

Finally, two opportunities to volunteer! First, if you are going to Annual, you are encouraged to contribute an hour or two at the International Visitor’s Center, to help orient international visitors. Second, my tenure as Editor of IL will expire in June, so we need a new Editor! A brief description of duties is presented on the final page. If you have experience with newsletters, you are encouraged to apply! It is a challenging but rewarding experience, without a doubt. I hope many of you will consider this exciting opportunity.

~ Rebecca L. Miller

Call for Submission

Do you have news about...

International library activities?

People in international librarianship?

Upcoming international conferences?

International partnerships between libraries?

Then why not submit it to International Leads?
Send your news to intl.leads.irrt@gmail.com for consideration.

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International Leads

March 2011

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Egypt

Although I was relieved to be home and to know my family is safe, I left behind many friends and colleagues and programs unfinished. During my time in Cairo I established close working relationships with two public library systems, the Mubarak Public Library (MPL) system and the Integrated Care Society (ICS), a NGO that maintains a network of libraries and cultural centers in Cairo. The MPL has a network of libraries in Cairo and throughout Egypt. The ICS has a relationship with the U.S. Embassy to provide programs on American society and culture. I partnered with the ICS to establish the first American Corner in Egypt in their flagship library, the Maadi Public Library located in Maadi, a southern suburb of Cairo. American Corners are dedicated information spaces hosted in schools, libraries, and other partner institutions worldwide to introduce visitors to U.S. society and values through books, videos, databases, and programs. Before I left I was working with the ICS and the MPL to establish ten new American Windows, smaller versions of American Corners, at 5 ICS libraries and 5 MPL libraries. I also helped to establish a Sister Library partnership between the ICS and the Queens Public Library (QPL) thanks to the willingness and enthusiasm of QPL’s CEO Tom Galante.

Public libraries in Egypt are at a critical stage of development. Egypt’s former first lady Suzanne Mubarak was responsible for establishing both library systems, as well as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The Bibliotheca is in a class by itself, but the ICS and MPL are much closer to the communities they serve and provide a wealth of services, including youth programming, books and databases, Internet access, cultural activities, English language lessons, vocational training and services to women and children.

In the post-Mubarak Egypt, libraries will play a critical role in building a civil society and are crucial to Egypt’s social and economic well-being. Unfortunately, in the chaotic days of the popular uprising against Mubarak, two ICS libraries were damaged. El Bahr Al Azam Public Library was destroyed on January 28. Shoubra El-Kheima Public Library was looted and 1,200 books stolen. Both libraries are in underserved areas comprised of hundreds of thousands of persons from lower socioeconomic backgrounds – just the populations most in need of library services. I was alerted to this damage by Heba Mohamed, Libraries Technical Manager at ICS, who emailed me photos of the damaged and destroyed libraries. Heba is a State Department International Visitor Leadership Program alumna who participated in the 3-week study tour of U.S. libraries and also attended ALA in 2008. Heba has been my best contact and has been instrumental in helping me establish the American Corner and the Sister Library partnership due to her professionalism, enthusiasm and good English skills. When Heba emailed me I immediately wrote ALA’s International Relations Office director Michael Dowling who put Heba and me in touch with AL Direct’s editor George Eberhart. George has since published an article about the damaged libraries in AL Direct, February 19, 2011 edition. I also wrote Tom Galante at the QPL and Tom immediately asked his staff to develop a webpage to help raise funds to send to the ICS. QPL serves a very multi-cultural community including a large Egyptian American community. I believe this is an example of how a Sister Library partnership can be of great benefit to both parties especially in a time of crisis. QPL’s efforts may help enlist the Egyptian Diaspora to assist libraries in Egypt when they most need it and will demonstrate to Egyptians that public institutions in the U.S. care about what is going on in Egypt.

The story of what happened to these Egyptian libraries is quite dramatic. According to Heba, “Thieves stole books, computer equipment, and furniture from the Al-Bahr Al-Azam Library in Giza (25 kilometers southwest of Cairo) and set fire to it on January 28. The library lost more than 19,000 volumes, a great loss.” Egyptian police attempted to stop them, but the looters threw Molotov cocktails

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A Ray of Hope: Youth Protect the Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Editor’s note: On February 12, 2011, the following message from Dr. Ismail Serageldin, the Director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, was posted on the library’s website. It bears repeating here, to illustrate that even in stressful situations, libraries are often considered treasured institutions.

To the great youth of Egypt, the leaders of the Egyptian revolution of 25 January 2011, I salute you. For …

The secret of your success lies in the bedrock of your values, not just in the specific knowledge you have gained. You have learned to learn, but more importantly, you have grown to care.

So, harness your skill, your imagination and your determination to create a better Egypt, a better world for all.

And as we honor the memory of those who died, salute the sacrifice of the wounded and celebrate the resolve of those who stayed the course, let us create the new Egypt, guided by a vision of a caring society where, in keeping with the immortal words, there would be:

NO Politics without principle
NO Wealth without work
NO Commerce without morality
NO Pleasure without conscience
NO Education without character
NO Science without humanity

A vision where a people’s greatness is measured by the quality of the lives of their poorest citizens not by the size of their armies or the scale of their buildings.

Yes! You have changed Egypt forever, and now we will follow your leadership and join with you in the task of creating the new Egypt.

My friends,
You have been called the children of the internet, or the Facebook generation, but you are more. You are the vanguard of the great global revolution of the 21st century. So, go forth into the journey of your lives, and create a better world for yourselves and for others. Lead and all shall follow. Think of the unborn, remember the forgotten, give hope to the forlorn, include the excluded, reach out to the unreached, and by your actions from this day onwards lay the foundation for better tomorrows.

Thank you. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

More information about the youth protecting the Library, including photos and videos can be found at http://www.bibalex.org (search under News).
An ALA Representative to the U. S. National Commission of UNESCO

In May 2010, ALA was again invited by the U.S. State Department to be a member of the U.S. National Commission to UNESCO. The IRC developed criteria for selecting an ALA representative and a call to serve was sent out in December 2010. IRC received a strong pool of nominations and recommended candidates were forwarded to the ALA Executive Board for approval.

ALA Nominations to IFLA Standing Committees

A call for IFLA nominations for the 2011-2015 cycle was sent out to the ALA membership in Spring 2010. IRC has reviewed all nominations from these units and presented the recommended list to the ALA Executive Board for approval in October and November 2010, and in January 2011. As of this writing, more than 30 ALA members have been recommended to serve on IFLA standing committees. The IRC would like to thank all the units of ALA for their effort to select highly qualified candidates to represent ALA.

ALA Advocacy Coordinating Group

Chair Sha Li Zhang joined the ALA Advocacy Coordinating Group to help connect ALA’s domestic and international advocacy efforts. The Group is interested in working with IRRT and IRC for an international snapshot day in April each year.

China-U. S. Collaboration

Chair Sha Li Zhang participated in the China – North American Library Conference, held in Beijing, September 2010. The bilateral conference was organized by the Library of Congress, National Library of China, and Library Society of China, with a theme of Sharing Digital Resources: Challenges and Opportunities. A U.S. delegation of more than 50 librarians and information professionals participated in the Conference.

The China-U.S. Librarians Professional Exchange Project, Think Globally, Act Globally, received additional funding of $250,000 from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) for extension through August 31, 2011. The project will continue its educational programs between the two countries and concentrate on further development of a web portal of Chinese resources. The Project combines collaborative efforts among the Chinese American Library Association (CALA), the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign’s Mortenson Center, and the Library Society of China. The project promotes the exchange of personnel and information between the library community in China and the United States, and a web portal development on cultural heritage from Suzhou Library and Northeast Normal University Library in China.

ALA 2015 International Strategic Plan

IRC, IRRT, and other ALA units have begun to develop the new 2015 International Strategic Plan, which will guide international initiatives, programs, and priorities of the Association. The time table projects the final version will be developed by the ALA Annual Conference in June 2011. Nancy Bolt, former Colorado State Librarian and IRRT Chair, led a group from IRC and IRRT in working on the document which will be shared with IRC and IRRT membership. Input and comments are welcome.

The Chair wishes to take this opportunity to express gratitude to Mr. Michael Dowling, IRO Director and his staff for his excellent assistance to the programs, initiatives, and events of IRC and IRRT.
International Leads

March 2011

International Relations Committee Announces Winners

Bogle-Pratt International Library Travel Fund

Madeline Mundt is the 2011 recipient of the American Library Association (ALA) International Relations Committee’s “Bogle-Pratt International Library Travel Fund.”

The award is in recognition of Sarah Comly Norris Bogle, a prominent U.S. librarian who made notable contributions to international library service. The Bogle Memorial Fund and the Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science will provide a $1,000 cash award for Mundt to attend her first international conference in Bilbao, Spain.

Mundt is planning to attend the International Conference on Technology, Knowledge and Society at the Universidad del País Vasco in Bilbao, Spain. At the conference she will present a paper titled “New Media, New Challenges: The Library and Multimedia Literacy in Higher Education.” She said global connections are of vital importance and participating in an international conference will help build ties in the library and information profession. “Through my paper and participation in the Conference’s ‘Technology and Education’ stream, I will gain a global perspective on the library’s role in helping students evaluate, use and produce multimedia content,” she added.

“Ms. Mundt is a reference librarian/subject specialist for Anthropology, Basque Studies, Ethnic Studies, Social and Sociology and a multimedia specialist at the University of Nevada, Reno. She will present a paper entitled ‘New Media, New Challenges: The Library and Multimedia Literacy in Higher Education’ at the International Conference on Technology, Knowledge and Society in Bilbao, Spain. Her background, her paper topic and the conference being held in the Basque region made her our choice for the Bogle Pratt Award,” said Sharon Bostick, Bogle Pratt Committee chair.

Sally Tseng is this year’s recipient of the American Library Association (ALA) International Relations Committee’s John Ames/Humphry/OCLC/Forest Press Award.

OCLC/Forest Press donated the cash award of $1,000, which is given to an individual for significant contribution to international librarianship.

Sally Tseng received this award for her significant contributions to international librarianship during the 40 years of her professional career.

She has made substantial and distinguished contributions to international librarianship by playing a leading role at the local, national and international levels. She has helped libraries and librarians in Asia and the United States through presentations and workshops on cataloging, subject analysis and new technology. She has been instrumental in introducing and implementing international standards in cataloging and electronic resources in libraries in many Asian countries.

Tseng has chaired and served on more than 50 committees of the American Library Association (ALA), the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), the Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). She was President of APALA, CALA, served on the ALA Council and acted as the executive director of CALA before retiring in 2002 from her administrative position at the University of California, Irvine. She was successful in arranging exchange visits between Chinese and American librarians and organized many conferences in China and the United States that attracted many delegates from both countries. In addition, she raised more than $30,000 with the help of CALA, to rebuild libraries in China and Taiwan that were destroyed and damaged by natural disasters.
International Relations Round Table and International Relations Committee Programs at ALA Annual 2011

Friday, June 24
8:30 am - 1:00 pm
Outreach through New Partnership: Strategies and Successes (IRRT Preconference)
Join us in this half day pre-conference program to learn more about what libraries around the world are doing to outreach through new partnerships. Presenters will discuss practical case studies, application of unique outreach models, successful implementation of creative programs, and summaries of library strategies and approaches to developing sustainable partnerships with local organizations. The $75 registration includes light refreshments and lunch.

1:30 - 3:30pm
Internat’l Relations Committee I

2:30pm - 4:00pm
Internat’l Librarians Orientation
An introduction to the ALA Conference and the city of New Orleans, for attendees from abroad. Meet your mentors who will help international librarians get the most from the conference experience. (For International librarians from outside the U.S.)

Saturday, June 25
8:00 am – 11:00 am
IRC/IRRT All Subcommittee

11:00 am - 12:00 noon
IFLA Update

1:30 pm - 3:30 pm
Literacy Programs in Libraries around the Globe
International Paper Session
What innovative programs and practices are libraries employing to develop literate communities? How are libraries partnering or collaborating with other organizations around literacy programs? The challenge includes both adult and childhood literacy and involves reaching out to those who cannot read or who have limited reading skills. These issues are the core of this year’s program, which will explore successful literacy initiatives in libraries of all types around the globe.

4:00 pm - 5:30 pm
Haiti and Chile Library Updates
It’s been a year since the devastating earthquakes that hit Chile and Haiti. Presenters from both countries will give an update on the current situation of libraries and the many aspects of support that needs to be provided in the aftermath of the earthquake. ALA will be accepting donations to help rebuild libraries in Chile and Haiti.

Sunday, June 26
8:00 am – 11:00am
IRRT Executive Committee

1:30 pm - 3:30 pm
Unbound: Making Scholarly Information Digital in Near East and South Asia Libraries
Digitization projects from the far side of the globe are turning heads as efforts to capture and disseminate the intellectual products of the past and present become increasingly sophisticated. Join us for this fascinating encounter with three such projects and learn about the obstacles they have overcome and the successes they have experienced.

4:00 pm - 5:30 pm
Copyright in Europe and Its Impact
A panel of renowned experts address the differences in American and European Copyright, the challenges of Copyright for e-materials, the essential facts American librarians should know of the European Copyright and European/American Copyright in the context of interlibrary loan.

Monday, June 27
8:00 am - 10:00 am
Leading the Way to Knowledge: How African Libraries Are Extending Information Access
Please join the IRC-Africa Subcommittee for a panel presentation, in which several presenters will share their experience with projects in meeting the increased demand for access to information. Digitization, open access, preservation, indigenous knowledge and oral tradition projects are just some of the topics discussed. Learn about the expectations, challenges, accomplishments, sustainability and lessons learned from these projects.

10:30 am - 12:00 noon
The “S” in International Sustainable Library Development: Sustainability Issues
Want to better understand the benefits and consequences of supplying foreign aid in the form of libraries and books to economically challenged countries? Come hear academics and ISLD program leaders discuss scholarship, best practices, and real life experience on the issue of sustainability and international library development, followed by an interactive question and answer session.

1:30 pm - 3:30 pm
Cultural Competence for Customer Service - IRRT Chair’s Program
This program will present speakers working on intercultural projects in their library community. Preceding the program the Humphry/OCLC/Forest Press Award for International Librarianship and the Bogle International Library Travel Fund Award will be presented.

6:00 - 8:00 pm
International Librarians Reception
Volunteers Needed for International Visitors Center at ALA Annual

The IRRT International Visitors Center (IVC) Committee needs volunteers to staff the IVC at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans, anytime from Friday, June 24 through Monday, June 27, 2011. The IVC is an essential help station for international conference attendees, conveniently located at the Convention Center near the exhibit halls to help answer questions and provide directions and conference information. Volunteers are supplied with the information needed to make this happen so all you need bring with you is a friendly smile and a desire to help. If interested, please contact Elizabeth Cramer, Co-Chair of the IRRT International Visitor’s Center Committee, at cramere@appstate.edu by June 1, 2011.

Volunteer and meet some new friends!

Call for Applications for International Leads Editor

The IRRT Publications Committee announces the opportunity for an IRRT member to volunteer time and expertise as Editor of the official organ of IRRT - the quarterly newsletter, International Leads.

As Editor, you are responsible for:
• Eliciting and editing content
• Producing layout using Adobe InDesign (provided)
• Liaising with the IRRT Publications Committee
• Attending ALA Midwinter and Annual meetings

A complete position description can be found at http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/irrt/irrtcommittees/irrtpubs/publications.cfm.

The position will start at the end of June, following the meeting of the Publications Committee at Annual. The Editor holds a two-year term, renewable once. Rebecca Miller has been Editor for the last four years and is ending her service to pursue other opportunities. She will be available by email to provide guidance to the incoming Editor.

If you are interested in this exciting opportunity, please send an email outlining your interest and any previous experience to the ALA International Relations Office: intl@ala.org.