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Prayer breakfast speeches focus on international outreach

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service

Washington — President Barack Obama and the administrator of the principal overseas U.S. aid agency urged people at the National Prayer Breakfast to turn their prayers and good works beyond the U.S. borders.

Speaking to the annual gathering Thursday, Rajiv Shah, keynote speaker and administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, challenged the audience of about 3,500 people from around the world to "an overarching purpose worthy of this room that has come together to follow the teachings of Jesus: Let us work together to end extreme poverty in our lifetime."

Shah, a Detroit-raised physician who also holds a master's degree in health economics, told stories of some of the people who inspire him in running the agency. He said USAID has worked with international partners to halve the rate of children's deaths from malaria, immunize 440 million kids and nearly eliminate the transmission of HIV from mothers to their children.

Among those stories was of his first encounter with hard-core poverty, on his first trip to India, where his father was born. There, in his first hours in the country he came upon a small child, dressed in rags, whose bare feet, emaciated body and wide eyes continue to haunt him, he said.

Another inspiration, he said, was Habiba, whom he met at a refugee camp outside Somalia. She told of leaving home with her two young children, on foot, as it became impossible to feed them because of famine.

"But as she pressed on, her children became too weak. ... First she carried one, and then the other," Shah said. "Eventually the strain became so much that she struggled to continue. She looked down at her two

children. And she said a prayer. And then she made the excruciating decision to leave one of them behind so she could save the other."

He asked the audience if the girl in India, the child left behind in Somalia, were "somehow lesser than our sons and daughters? Did their fathers love them less? Did their mothers?"

Shah said it is achievable to end extreme poverty, "but only if all of us -- from science, business, government, and faith -- come together for the poor. We can end extreme poverty for the 1.1 billion people who live on a dollar and a quarter a day. We can end it for the 860 million people who will go to sleep hungry tonight. And we can end it for the 6.6 million children who will die this year before their fifth birthday. As terrible as these numbers are, they do not adequately describe what poverty is -- and what poverty does. It drains our basic human dignity. And if we're being honest, it sometimes drains our compassion for those who suffer."

In his remarks, Obama said the breakfast is a time to "put aside labels of party and ideology and recall what we are first: all children of a loving God." He said that in answering God's call "to make his work our own," people should remember Abraham Lincoln's admonition that "our concern should not be whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side."

He made note of starting his career and of becoming a Christian while a community organizer working with churches that were "intent on breaking the cycle of poverty in hard-hit communities" of Chicago.

Obama credited that work with leading him "to embrace Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior"; to his wife, Michelle; and to public service.

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He also talked about experiencing "the love that faith can instill in our lives," during visits to the Holy Land, in houses of worship, "whether paying my respects at the tomb of Archbishop Romero in San Salvador or visiting a synagogue on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul or a Buddhist temple in Bangkok."

Obama said he's "felt the compassion of so many faith leaders around the world, and I am especially looking forward to returning to the Vatican next month to meet His Holiness, Pope Francis, whose message about caring for the 'least of these' is one that I hope all of us heed. Like Matthew, he has answered the call of Jesus, who said 'follow me,' and he inspires us with his words and deeds, his humility, his mercy and his missionary impulse to serve the cause of social justice."

Most of Obama's remarks were on the subject of international religious freedom and the threats faced because of religious beliefs or identification.

"We see governments engaging in discrimination and violence against the faithful," he said. "We sometimes see religion twisted in an attempt to justify hatred and persecution against other people just because of who they are, or how they pray or who they love."

Recently in the Central African Republic, conflicts along religious lines have been fueled, "even though to harm anyone in the name of faith is to diminish our own relationship with God," Obama said. "Extremists succumb to an ignorant nihilism that shows they don't understand the faiths they claim to profess -- for the killing of the innocent is never fulfilling God's will; in fact, it's the ultimate betrayal of

God's will."

The National Prayer Breakfast is a multiday, nondenominational, but heavily Christian event highlighted by the breakfast itself. It is attended by a global representation of political, diplomatic and religious leaders, including every U.S. president dating back to Dwight Eisenhower. Limited news coverage is allowed only for the main breakfast, which is open only to reporters admitted with the White House press.

The titular hosts each year are members of Congress, typically one Republican and one Democrat, who are active in prayer groups in the House or Senate. This year's hosts were Reps. Louie Gohmert, R-Texas, and Janice Hahn, D-Calif., who made light of more contentious encounters in politics.

Gohmert joked that he was well prepared for handling the meanness and backstabbing of Congress because, "I was a deacon in the Baptist church."

Hahn said she used prayer to help her forgive Gohmert for a speech in the House last summer in which he said cutting food stamps wouldn't be immoral or controversial because some poor people are obese and someone on food stamps reportedly used the government assistance to buy king crab legs.

"For all you know it was imitation crab," she joked.

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