

## CDC Evacuates From Egypt

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As the dramatic events unfolded in Egypt, CDC staff was there—working for public health in the most populous country in the Arab world as it erupted in mass protests. The historic uprising focused world attention on politics in Egypt. January 2011 marked a turning point for Egypt—and for CDC staff who were abruptly told to come home.

On February 1, the US Embassy called and ordered them to evacuate. They were to be on a flight the next day. It was a hectic time, full of emotion.

CGH's Erica Dueger, DVM, PhD, had been in Egypt for three and half years, serving as country director and director, Global Disease Detection Regional Center at NAMRU-3 (Cairo). "I was sad to leave during such a historical time for Egypt and the region."

Her colleague Sharon Daves, MPH, deputy director, GDD Center, was equally disappointed. "I was very sad to leave our staff and the friends I had made; I had not slept very much over the previous week; so although I was glad to get to a quiet place where I could sleep, I felt guilty for leaving my friends and colleagues who were encountering the same environment in their very own country." After a year and four months in Cairo, she was really enjoying her assignment. "I was enjoying living and working with the Egyptians. Their hospitality was amazing and the history surrounding where I lived/worked is overwhelming—so many amazing things to experience!"

Three other CDC employees were also on site as the protestors took to the streets. The trio all work for the Global Immunization Division and include Ann Buff, MD, MPH, medical officer working for the Polio Eradication Program; Nahad Sadr-Azodi, MS, MPH, a public health advisor working for measles elimination; and Boubker Naouri, MPH, epidemiologist and medical officer also working for measles elimination. All three were seconded to the World Health Organization's (Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office).

### Potential for Change "Palpable"

It was an exciting time to be in Egypt, notes Buff. "The sense of potential for change was palpable. There had been a series of events moving people in that direction, which escalated after the Tunisia revolt."

Sadr-Azodi, whose wife is Egyptian, feels a special tie to the country. "My parents live in the region, so working in the region felt like returning to my roots. I am a product of the revolution in Iran. It happened when I was 6. I felt like I was reliving that experience and I was worried about the worst case scenario."

But the historic significance lent an air of excitement to the worry. "When I was young, we saw Egypt as the mother country of the Arab world," says Naouri. "It was amazing to be there, to see the mosques and feel so small in front of the



A tank in Cairo, February 2, 2011. Photo by Sharon Daves, who says, "Our last views of Cairo as we entered the airport complex. The Egyptian military had stationed tanks along the major thoroughfares to maintain order during the revolution."



Nahad Sadr-Azodi, Ann Buff, and Boubker Naouri in Atlanta and back at work after evacuating Egypt. The trio says it is rewarding to be part of health diplomacy in that region. Photo by Kathy Nellis

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pyramids.”

Of course there are challenges, Daves notes, but “there were no challenges that you don’t encounter in any other large city—pollution, traffic, political factors.” Her favorite things were the people she worked with and the opportunities to improve health in the region.

### CDC Perceived as Positive Partner

That sentiment is echoed by the other CDC staff. “It’s a conflict-ridden region and sometimes people perceive American policy as not positive,” says Buff. “But almost everyone is interested in good health for their children and they perceive CDC as a positive partner.” Naouri adds, “Our public health work helps to improve the image of America in the region.”

“It is good to be part of the health diplomacy,” says Sadr-Azodi. “I cherish that opportunity.” While the chance to make an impact in public health is what each values most, the cultural opportunities are rewarding as well.

“It was wonderful to be in the cradle of civilization,” notes Buff. “My sons are 12 and 9 and it has been an amazing opportunity for our family. Our kids studied Arabic language and Islamic culture in school and visited cultural and historical sites on class trips.”

Moreover, it was exhilarating to be on the scene as history was being made. But as the demonstrations grew, decisions were being made to evacuate the CDC staff. It was a tense time.

### Keeping in Touch in Tense Times: EOC Reaches Across the World

“Things changed quickly. The government shut down the internet and mobile phones but our land lines worked and we could call and check on each other,” says Naouri.

“The embassy kept in touch with us by radio and phone,” says Sadr-Azodi. “So did CDC’s Emergency Operation Center in Atlanta. They called several times. And we checked on each other every few hours. We all lived in different areas of the city and it was important to stay in touch. I lived near the square, close to it all, and after a day or so of tension and uncertainty I was impressed by the prompt formation of the neighborhood committees. They patrolled the area, keeping it safe.”

Says Buff, “The Egyptians are a very proud people, and they believe strongly in family and community. The people joined together to protect the neighborhood.” Naouri adds, “They were even telling the tourists. It’s okay. Please stay. We will protect you.” Despite the crowds and the civil unrest at no time did she feel unsafe, says Buff.

No one knew what would happen or when. The demonstrations grew. “We work for the US government but we also work for WHO, a United Nations organization,” says Buff. “The orders to evacuate came almost simultaneously from the US government and the UN.”

### If You Can Only Pack 40 Pounds, What Do You Take?

“If you have less than 24 hours to pack, what do you take?” asks Sadr-Azodi. Practical items? Personal items? Professionally, they were distressed to have to leave files behind. They were only allowed



Sharon Daves and Erica Dueger say there were sad to leave during such a historical time for Egypt and the region.



This photo is from the Cairo Race for the Cure that took place in October of 2010 and includes the following people: Tonia Refaey (WHO-EMRO), Shereen Soliman (Nahad Sadr-Azodi’s wife), Sadr-Azodi, Daves, Ann Iverson (NAMRU-3), and Sarah Botros (NAMRU-3).

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to pack about 40 pounds each, not much when you are choosing among all your possessions.

"I remember my neighbor coming by and worrying because she could not pack all her mother's silver into her kids' carry-on bags," recalls Buff. Buff packed important tax and insurance documents, a hard drive of family photos, and the kids' school books along with cold-weather clothes.

The Duegers scanned their photos onto a hard drive. Like Buff, Daves took tax and insurance documents, hard drive and clothes for cold weather "since we didn't know where we were being routed and how long it would take to reach Atlanta."

Leaving people was harder. "My wife's parents are Egyptian. Egypt is their home," says Sadr-Azodi. Leaving family was just part of the anguish. They say it was hard to leave Egyptian colleagues too. Daves says, "The Egyptian people were really amazing throughout the revolution and evacuation experience; I called our staff to check on them and instead of me helping them, they offered to help me and wanted to make sure I had food and felt safe. There are so many stories of heroic efforts of the Egyptian people—there are some amazing heroes who should be honored for their efforts to help their fellow Egyptians and foreigners."

And then there were the pets which were left behind. "We have a friend in the embassy community who stayed in order to make arrangements to evacuate all the dogs and cats, says Sadr-Azodi. "He had made a commitment to embassy personnel to ensure the safety of their pets." Naouri had to leave his border collie behind. But the dog and his family have now been reunited. "It took about 10 days but she is home with us now. The US Embassy in Cairo did a great job."

So that story has a happy ending. And so does their evacuation.

Sadr-Azodi recalls, "The evacuation process was very smooth. We landed at Frankfurt in the middle of the night and consular services were great. They had homemade brownies (his favorite) for us at 3:00 a.m. and they were all smiling the story was the same when we arrived in Atlanta. Our GID colleagues were at the airport, the director, the team lead, with all the paperwork ready, cars, hotels, and food packages all ready to go. I was in tears. It was so emotional, especially for my wife, to see those familiar faces at the airport."

And while they are home, they have many favorite things to look forward to returning to, says Dueger, including "the fantastic team at GDD Center and at NAMRU-3; the large number of successful regional projects with great regional capacity building focus, helping to build a center within the outstanding infrastructure of NAMRU-3 and its historical presence in a challenging region." Can you tell she loves her work?



Daves agrees. "My favorite things are the people I worked with and the opportunities to improve health in the region."

Daves continues, "Erica and I have continued our work with our staff, working out of Building 21, via conference calls and e-mails. It has been a nice opportunity to reconnect with CDC colleagues and discuss scientific projects face-to-face, while enjoying time with friends and family in evenings/weekends."

Buff travels to Juba, Sudan at the end of March for a surveillance review of the Polio Eradication Programme in southern Sudan, an activity that was



Daves holding a child and standing next to his brother while conducting a tour of a home that keeps ducks/chickens inside their home compound. "I was there for an Influenza Division Project with CARE International where we tried to support community groups to actively work to combat H5N1," says Daves.

This photo is of Daves on leave last fall at Hatputshet's Temple in Luxor.

planned prior to the Egyptian revolution, she says. "At this point, the initial 30-day evacuation order was extended for an additional 30 days by the Department of State. We are looking forward to returning to Egypt as soon as the order is lifted. Our WHO colleagues who were evacuated returned to Egypt by the end of February and the regional office is back to routine operations."

Naouri is still working from Atlanta to support activities in the region. So is Sadr-Azodi. "I am currently working out of the CDC headquarters offices and remotely supporting priority activities in the region, including the upcoming initiative Vaccination Week in the Eastern Mediterranean during the week of 24 to 30 April. [Vaccination Week](#) is an advocacy, education and communication annual effort to celebrate and promote the value of immunization. We miss our family, friends, colleagues and our home. We are not sure when we will return. As for the next adventure, whatever it may be, we just hope that it's as fulfilling and rewarding as our current experience has been thus far."

This **Inside Story** by Kathy Nellis.

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