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**National Naval Medical Center Holds Iftar Dinner to Honor Muslims**

By Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample, USA  
 American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Nov. 6, 2004 -- The meal is called Iftar, meaning to "break the day's fast." It is meal enjoyed by Muslims all over the world to end a day of fasting during Ramadan, which ends this month.



*Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz addresses Muslims at an Iftar dinner at the National Naval Medical Center, in Bethesda, Md., Nov. 5. During his speech, Wolfowitz told the audience that Muslims "must help lead the rest of the world in the direction of freedom." Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample, USA (Click photo for screen-resolution image); [high-resolution image](#) available.*

A small group of Muslim servicemembers, joined by others of their faith and officials including Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, celebrated the Muslim ritual at the National Naval Medical Center, in Bethesda, Md.

The dinner, which consisted of beef and chicken shish kebabs, salad, green beans and baklava, was hosted by the hospital's chaplain center.

The Defense Department estimates there are some 7,000 Muslims serving in the various branches of the military.

Wolfowitz, who traveled from Colorado, where he was meeting with National Guard leaders, spoke during

the event. Joining the deputy secretary was Navy Rear Adm. Adam M. Robinson Jr., commander of the National Naval Medical Center and chief of the Navy Medical Corps.

During his speech, Wolfowitz told audience members that America is safer because of the sacrifices made by past generations of servicemembers during World War II, Korea and the Cold War. And, he said, the United States will be safer in the future because of servicemembers who are making the same sacrifices today.

He also reminded the audience that U.S. servicemembers are sacrificing their lives for the freedom of Muslims as well. Wolfowitz pointed out that the U.S. military has helped liberate and rescue thousands of Muslims in Kuwait, Somalia and Bosnia.

"I think sometimes people forget that the people liberated 10 years ago in the war in Kuwait were mostly Muslims," he said. "And sometimes people forget the several

hundred thousand people in Somalia who were rescued from starvation by great American Marines and soldiers were mostly Muslims."

Several hundred thousand more Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo were saved from ethnic cleansing because of U.S. military action, he added.

"We didn't do this because they were Muslims; we did it because they were human beings and because acting to help them and protect them helps to make a safer and more secure and peaceful world," he explained. "We will have a safer and more secure world only when people are free."

Wolfowitz, who said that Muslims "must help lead the rest of the world in the direction of freedom," also pointed out that the United States is not fighting for the freedom of others alone. In places like Afghanistan and Iraq, Muslims too have enlisted in the fight for freedom, he said.

"I don't think we frankly care enough about the sacrifices that our allies in those countries are making," he told the audience. "I don't think there are many Americans who realize that more Iraqi police and army soldiers have been killed in the fight than Americans."

Although "every number is a tragedy, I think it speaks volumes that each time a police station is blown up in Iraq, there are lines outside that station the next day of people who want to sign up," he said.

"For every position advertised in the Iraqi army or Iraqi National Guard, four of five recruits come forward to volunteer. ... That's because the great majority of Iraqis welcome this change for freedom," he said.

Navy Chaplain (Capt.) George Ridgeway, Naval District of Washington, who came up with the idea to hold the Iftar dinner, said he hopes to make it an annual event.

He said that it is important that "Muslims in the military must have free access to exercise their religion."

That has never been a problem for Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Yusupha Kah, from Gambia, West Africa, a lab technician at the hospital's blood bank, and his roommate Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Mamadou Sambe, from neighboring Senegal, a lab tech in the microbiology department.

They both said the command at NNMC has made accommodations for their religious practice by allowing them opportunity and space to pray.

They were also pleased with the evening's event. Sambe said the dinner allowed him to pray in a group with other Muslims as their faith teaches.

Kah, meanwhile, said he was surprised by the deputy secretary's visit and enjoyed the speech. "The secretary really knows Muslims, and he understands us very well," he said. "I can tell he's been in a Muslim country."

Wolfowitz once served as ambassador to Indonesia, the largest Muslim country in the world.

**Biography:**

[Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz](#)

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Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Yusupha Kah (left), from Gambia, West Africa, a lab technician at the hospital's blood bank, and his roommate Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Mamadou Sambe, from neighboring Senegal, a lab tech in the microbiology department, enjoy the Iftar dinner hosted by the National Naval Medical Center's chaplain's office Nov. 5. Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample, USA



High resolution photo



Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz prepares to take part in the Iftar meal as Muslim chaplain Imam Yahya Hendi explains the menu. The secretary was the guest speaker at the first iftar dinner held at the National Naval Medical Center, Nov. 5. Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample.



High resolution photo



Muslim chaplain Imam Yahya Hendi leads prayer for Muslim servicemembers and others from the local Muslim community prior to starting the Iftar meal. The Iftar meal is served at the end of each day during Ramadaan. The National Naval Medical Center held its first Iftar dinner for Muslim servicemembers, hospital workers and their families, Nov. 5. Photo by Sgt. 1st Class Doug Sample, USA



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