

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

State Department, U.S. Government Broadcasters Respond to Virginia Tech Massacre ^[1]



From their offices in Washington and its suburbs, U.S. government officials charged with explaining the American way to publics abroad were put to the test last week by the Virginia Tech shootings.

Alhurra, the U.S. government's TV channel in the Middle East and Europe, which beams programs from the nearby Washington suburb of Springfield, Virginia, continually updated the Virginia Tech campus massacre in which 32 persons were shot to death by a deranged student. As the story developed, Alhurra included live interviews with Arab students who talked about the 2,000 Arabs that attend Virginia Tech. They mentioned how the Arab community pulled together and expressed their sympathy for the victims and their families.

There were comments from friends and roommates of Reema Samaha, one of the students killed, whose family is from Lebanon, and a profile of Liviu Librescu, a Holocaust survivor and Virginia Tech professor shot to death while protecting his students.

Alhurra also reported that the shootings spurred gun control debate in the U.S., and carried comments from those who support and oppose gun ownership. The shop owner who sold the gun to the shooter said the gun could have been bought from anyone. An analyst noted that the pro-gun lobby will continue to pressure the U.S. congress not to impose new gun control laws.

Alhurra also provided live coverage of the memorial service at Virginia Tech where President Bush spoke, as well as live coverage of several press briefings by law enforcement and university officials, including the news conference where police criticized NBC News for airing video mailed to it by the shooter, when he took time out from his rampage. Alhurra's sister station Radio Sawa carried regular updates on the story and profiled two of the victims who had ties to the Middle East.

Voice of America pulled no punches in its report that the shootings could impact future foreign student enrollment in U.S. universities, because of America's "gun culture." This view was balanced by interviews with foreign students at Virginia Tech and elsewhere who expressed confidence. Other content was beamed abroad reinforcing that "Americans go about dealing with such an immense problem," said VOA Director Dan Austin. (View/download VOA's statements on Va. Tech coverage [here](#)  and [here](#) .)

Across town in Washington, the State Department swung its "Rapid Response" into action. Talking points and alerts were sent immediately to State Department posts abroad and to senior policymakers throughout government which could be used to "reassure audiences

worried about safety at U.S. schools," Media outlets abroad began carrying stories about nationals who were attending Virginia Tech and U.S. diplomatic posts abroad were being contacted by local media, particularly in India, from where tens of thousands have come to study in America. Two persons from India were killed on the Virginia Tech campus.

At State Department spokesperson Sean McCormack's daily press briefing on Tuesday, April 17, the first question came from a reporter asking whether the Virginia Tech shootings might discourage potential international students and faculty from coming to the U.S. McCormack answered that "the State Department issues right now over 200,000 student visas per year. And the United States is a popular destination for good reason for foreign students studying."

He continued: "It is a good environment for students to explore boundaries of knowledge, contribute to a body of knowledge in their given area of study. This incident was a terrible tragedy." He reassured that "local officials, state officials, federal officials, as well as university officials, do everything that they believe is prudent, everything that they can to ensure that the students are able to study and thrive in a safe environment... on the whole, this is a place where I expect foreign students will want to continue to come to study."

On Wednesday, April 18, the daily State Department briefing focused on the death of Peace Corps worker Julie Campbell in the Philippines and its effect on Peace Corps operations, as well as events related to the Sudan, and the Middle East. The Virginia Tech shootings were not raised by the State Department press corps in attendance.

The following day, Thursday, April 19, undersecretary of state Karen Hughes, in her appearance before the House Appropriations Subcommittee, took the opportunity to recall the growing number of international students on U.S. campuses, and stated America's commitment to make them as safe as possible.

Will the monstrous event impact foreign student enrollment in America, where an estimated 400,000 study from abroad? "It is anyone's guess," says Dr. Arie Kruglanski, distinguished professor of Psychology at the University of Maryland. "Conceivably it could be one more factor pushing foreign students away from U.S. institutions. The visa problems and the anti-American feelings have been already doing that."

The State Department did its best to allay the fears of prospective students from abroad, and, for reporters who cover the State Department, the Virginia Tech shootings seemed to be a two-day story.
