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Kennedy Center's Kaiser Aims to Expand U.S. Cultural Exchanges

By Laurence Arnold

Dec. 7 (Bloomberg) -- Michael Kaiser, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, is redefining the way the U.S. participates in international cultural exchanges.

Sending American artists to perform in other countries is not enough, Kaiser said in a speech today to about 100 people at the National Press Club in Washington.

For the past three years, Kaiser, who volunteers as a cultural ambassador with the U.S. State Department, has helped arts organizations in other countries improve their planning, marketing and fundraising, and he has brought artists from Iraq, China and elsewhere to the U.S.

"I feel we have to exchange with other nations, but it doesn't necessarily have to be art that we offer back," Kaiser said. "Instead of only exchanging our art for the art of other nations, we should also offer our experience in arts management and revenue generation."

Kaiser said he and the Kennedy Center have focused their training efforts in countries that are "in transition and in trouble" -- including Pakistan and Iraq -- because that's where art can have the greatest impact.

"I believe the arts have the power to heal," he said. "Expressing anger, pain and fear on stage is productive and effective."

Kaiser, 53, has had a global agenda since becoming Kennedy Center president in 2001.

Baghdad Trip

He travels to Mexico every three months to monitor a program he developed with the government to help 33 arts organizations with administrative functions. Kaiser is helping run a similar program in China and will begin working with arts groups in Egypt next April.

He also visited Baghdad in 2003 in advance of a performance in Washington by the Iraq National Symphony Orchestra.

In Pakistan, one of Kaiser's newest challenges, arts programs have "experienced 30 years of neglect," he said. He has worked with officials there to train arts leaders, create a Web site on Pakistani culture and establish a children's theater collaboration with the Kennedy Center.

There's only so much the Kennedy Center can do in Pakistan, a country still on a bumpy path to democracy, Kaiser said. "It is still unclear if the current government will demonstrate a sustained interest in this endeavor and will be willing to change the vestigial laws that continue to restrict artistic freedom," he said.

One of Kaiser's latest international projects is an Arab Arts Festival at the Kennedy Center slated for 2009. Last month he traveled to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria to meet with arts groups and government officials.

Kaiser said he hopes the project can "foster relationships between Americans and Arabs that will help to unite and bring understanding and peace."

"This is an ambitious goal. Some would call it naive," he said. "But it would be impossible for us not to try."

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