

Peanut executive returns after salmonella outbreak

By Mary Clare Jalonick
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON — The peanut industry executive whose filthy processing plants were blamed in a salmonella outbreak two years ago that killed nine people and sickened hundreds more is back in the business.

Stewart Parnell, former president of the now-bankrupt Peanut Corp. of America, is working as a consultant to peanut companies as the federal government's criminal investigation against him has languished for more than 18 months, The Associated Press has learned.

Parnell, who invoked the Fifth Amendment to avoid testifying before Congress in February 2009, once directed employees to "turn them loose" after samples of peanuts had tested positive for salmonella and then were cleared in a second test, according to e-mails uncovered at the time by congressional investigators.

In an interview with the AP, Parnell expressed exasperation and said he wants the pending criminal investigation resolved — one way or another.

"They just say we're still investigating," Parnell said. "I feel like I wish they'd come on and do what they're going to do. I'd like to get this behind me."

Parnell also said he has been directed by his lawyers not to discuss his case with family members of the nine people who died in the salmonella outbreak blamed on his processed peanuts.

"My lawyers will not let me say anything or I'd be in front of every one of them per-

sonally," Parnell said to reporters. Republican Rep. Greg Walden of Oregon, who brought a jar of Parnell's peanuts to the congressional hearing last year and asked him if he would eat them, said Wednesday that he hopes a thorough investigation is being conducted.

"Families that lost loved ones in this preventable outbreak deserve some sense of justice, especially as those responsible are continuing on with business as usual," he said. "This sure doesn't sound like swift and certain justice, which is disappointing for all sides."

Michigan Rep. Bart Stupak, the Democratic chairman of the House Energy and Commerce investigations subcommittee, also on Wednesday urged the government to conclude the investigation as soon as possible.

Family members of some of the victims who died say they are eager to see Parnell behind bars.

"My God, when are we going to hold anyone responsible?" said Jeff Almer, whose mother, Shirley Almer, was the first known death from the outbreak in Minnesota. "So far to this day, nothing's happened to this man. I think every person in America who was affected by this, every family who lost someone, deserves to hear the truth from this guy."

A federal judge in Virginia earlier this month approved a \$12 million insurance settlement for Almer's family and more than 100 other salmonella victims.

Randy Napier's mother died in Ohio after eating peanut butter linked to Parnell's peanuts.

Center to include other faiths

By the Associated Press

NEW YORK — A proposed Islamic community center near ground zero will include separate prayer spaces for Muslims, Christians, Jews and people of other faiths, the imam behind plans for the facility wrote in an op-ed piece published online Tuesday.

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf wrote in The New York Times that the attention surrounding the plans for the \$100 million community center just blocks from the site of the Sept. 11 attacks "reflects the degree to which people care about the very American values under debate: recognition of the rights of others, tolerance and freedom of worship."

He said it was critical that Americans "not back away" from completing the project.

"The wonderful outpouring of support for our right to build this community center from across the social, religious and political spectrum seriously undermines the ability of anti-American radicals to recruit young, impressionable Muslims by falsely claiming that America persecutes Muslims for their faith," he wrote. "These efforts by radicals at distortion endanger our national security and the personal security of Americans worldwide."

The comments published in the Times were among Rauf's most extensive on the Islamic center since national leaders began weighing in on the debate earlier this year.

For months, the debate has focused on whether the plans for the center would include a mosque just blocks north of where Islamic extremists destroyed the World Trade Center and killed nearly 2,800 people on Sept. 11, 2001.

Opponents say the mosque should be moved farther away out of sensitivity for the families of 9/11 victims; supporters say religious freedom should be protected.

For the past two months, Rauf has been traveling abroad, including taking a 15-day trip paid for by the U.S. Department of State to promote religious tolerance in the Middle East. While on the trip, he occasionally spoke about the center, mostly to local Arab media. He returned to the United States on Sunday.

In the op-ed piece, he explained his reasons for not speaking out more and sooner, saying he felt it would "not be right to comment from abroad."

"It would be better if I addressed these issues once I returned home to America,



Hasan Jamali/Associated Press

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, standing center, speaks briefly to worshipers inside a mosque after leading midday prayers.

and after I could confer with leaders of other faiths who have been deliberating with us over this project," he wrote. "My life's work has been focused on building bridges between religious groups and never has that been as important as it is now."

In the nearly 1,000-word op-ed, he outlined his vision for the center, referring to it as a "shared space" for the community that will include "a multifaith memorial dedicated to victims of the Sept. 11 attacks."

"I am very sensitive to the feelings of the families of victims of 9/11, as are my fellow leaders of many faiths," he wrote.

"I know there will be interest in our financing, and so we will clearly identify all of our financial backers," he wrote.

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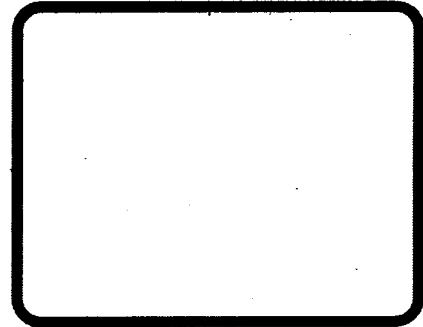
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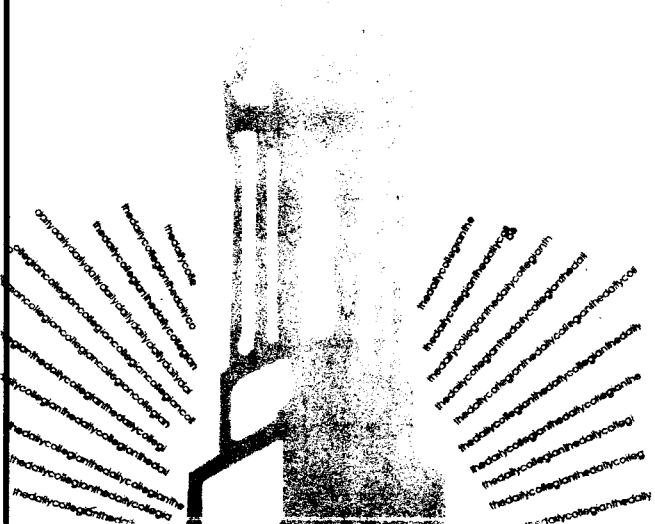
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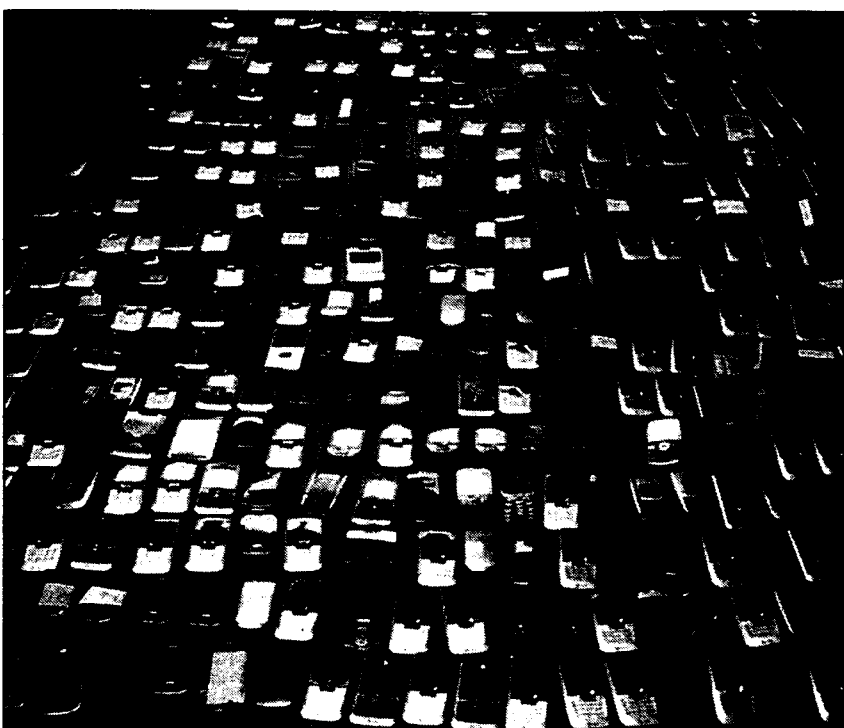
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