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America's image

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Now one might ask why should we care what people around the world think of the United States, but their attitudes clearly feed into support for terrorism in some cases, in others for constraints on their governments who may want to ally themselves with the United States.

New research, however, suggests that it is clearly possible to remedy the situation on a country-by-country basis and identifies ways to do it. According to a poll to be released tomorrow by the organization Terror Free Tomorrow at the Heritage Foundation, in the world's three most populous Muslim countries -- Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh -- public perceptions of the United States are capable of changing dramatically, as a consequence of generous disaster aid and humanitarian assistance from this nation.

To quote from the study, "The bottom line is that American aid is the single most important action the people of the three largest Muslim countries want from the United States. And here's the key to winning hearts and minds: deeper American assistance directly to the people, following their expressed priorities."

Contrary to conventional wisdom, which has it that humanitarian assistance only affects public opinion on a short-term basis, the poll shows that more than a year and a half after the tsunami hit the Indian Ocean, the aid provided by the United States was the single biggest factor in favorable public opinion. A majority of Indonesians surveyed in August said that they viewed the United States favorably because of U.S. relief efforts after the devastating disaster. Similarly, a survey conducted in Pakistan in May showed that as a consequence of disaster relief after the 2005 earthquake, goodwill towards the United States persisted.

Meanwhile, in Bangladesh the first study of public attitudes towards the United States in five years indicates a great appetite for American foreign assistance. In terms of overall favorable views of the United States, Bangladesh ranks comparatively high -- because of the sustained foreign aid over the years. The three most important things the Bangladeshis want from the United States -- and which they say will improve their opinions further -- is help with economic growth, education and health care.

This is information from which the State Department, which now houses the U.S. Agency for International Development, ought to take a serious lesson....The study by Terror Free Tomorrow also found that while American aid is hugely popular, the American war on terror is just as unpopular. While this fact may not be that surprising, it does represent a dilemma. Clearly we cannot desist from fighting international terrorism and radical Islamist networks aiming to do harm (or destroy if they could) the United States and our way of life.

Yet, in order to reclaim the moral high ground and the standing of the United States as an international leader in many parts of the world, that fight also has to be couched in terms of the overall benefit to others, like the three countries that were the subject of Terror Free Tomorrow's poll. If you ask people who can do more for you and your children, if you ask who can improve your country's future, the answer should be obvious -- the United States, not Osama bin Laden.