

October 11, 2006

Analysis: Public opinion surveys trusted?

By Michael Stothard
UPI Correspondent

Given the difficulties of accurate data collection in developing countries, can public opinion surveys such as these be trusted?

Terror Free Tomorrow is an organization which studies attitudes towards terrorism around the world. In a recent survey conducted in Bangladesh, the remote village of Chak Boyra, situated in the Chor Area of Jamuna River, was randomly selected for surveying. When they reached the village there was almost no one there. They had all migrated for the rainy season.

Kenneth Ballen, president of Terror Free Tomorrow, told United Press International that in the village of Satshikha, which was in the Bangladesh 2001 census, did not even exist when they arrived to survey it.

Some argue there are actually advantages to conducting public opinion surveys in less developed countries. The populace is often more responsive to questioning than in the West, because they are not constantly bombarded with surveys. This is particularly the case in fledgling democracies where people are not used to being asked their opinion at all.

Kenneth Ballen told UPI that in recent public opinion surveys in Indonesia, "people have willingly submitted to long and detailed interviewing, often lasting several hours, due to the novelty of being asked their opinions. People have been usually proud to participate in the surveys, particularly women."

Ballen also admits, however, that many of the participants are inclined not to give honest answers for fear of who might read it. Again, this calls into question the validity of the study.

Some argue that the problems of poor infrastructure and nervous participants simply need to be taken into account when attempting to draw conclusions from the data. Problems such as these do not invalidate public policy data as a whole.

Husain Haqqani, director of the Center for International Relations, stressed that conducting a problematic survey was better than not doing a survey at all. "I would rather trust a survey than someone waxing lyrically in a boardroom," he said. Even if the surveys in the developing world can be flawed and inaccurate, they are still important to do. "You do not throw the baby out with the bathwater," said Haqqani.

