CNN Anderson Cooper Show *AC 360* Transcript (9/11/07)

So much attention is being paid, of course, to Iraq and to Afghanistan. But one of the next great places where potential threats is Pakistan. There was a suicide attack there today.

And a new poll out shows just how popular Osama bin Laden is in some parts of Pakistan, a country which is, in many ways, an ally of the United States in this so-called war on terror.

CNN Terrorism Analyst **Peter Bergen** reports.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

PETER BERGEN, CNN TERRORISM ANALYST (voice-over): Six years on the run, six years taunting the West, inspiring, if not executing, terrorism. The working assumption of U.S. intelligence is that Osama bin Laden is here, in the wild and lawless borderlands of Pakistan.

We know that Pakistan, and especially its president, Pervez Musharraf, is one of the most important allies the United States has in the war on terror.

And we also know the U.S. gives the Pakistani military hundreds of millions of dollars a year to go after terrorists.

So why has al Qaeda managed to regroup in Pakistan? The answer is that al Qaeda's safe haven is built on a solid foundation of favorable Pakistani public opinion.

KEN BALLEN, TERROR FREE TOMORROW: I would say this poll is the most disturbing one of the many that we've ever done. The reason this one is so disturbing is that in the one Muslim nation that already has nuclear weapons, people who are intent on using them against us, such as al Qaeda and bin Laden, enjoy more popular support than the people we are trusting, such as President Musharraf, to safeguard those nuclear weapons.

BERGEN: Ken Ballen runs the independent polling organization Terror Free Tomorrow. These polling numbers, based on more than 1,000 face-to-face interviews across Pakistan in recent weeks, are brand new.

Take the approval ratings. President Musharraf, 38 percent. Osama bin Laden, 46 percent. That's right. Nearly half of Pakistanis on the front line of the war on terror favor Osama bin Laden over their own president.

And in the Northwest Frontier Province, where bin Laden is likely hiding, he enjoys a 70 percent approval rating.

Thirty-eight percent of Pakistanis support the Taliban and a third support al Qaeda. No surprise, then, that when the Terror Free Tomorrow pollsters asked whether U.S. troops should go after al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan, three-quarters of Pakistanis said no.

And what do Pakistanis think of President George W. Bush? He gets 9 percent approval.

After the American relief effort in Pakistan following the 2005 earthquake in Kashmir, Terror Free Tomorrow found 46 percent of Pakistanis had a favorable opinion of the United States. That's now down to 19 percent.

BALLEN: We failed in winning hearts and minds, at least in Pakistan.

BERGEN: The majority of Pakistanis said their opinion of the United States would improve if American educational, medical aid and business investment increased. And the U.S. granted more visas for Pakistanis to work in the United States.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Peter joins us now from Washington.

Peter, was there any good news in this poll?

BERGEN: There was some good news, Anderson, for the United States in this poll, even though there was obviously quite a bit of sympathy for al Qaeda and the Taliban and Pakistan. When you ask the question to Pakistanis, would you vote for a coalition of anti- American religious parties, only 3 to 4 percent said yes. So in the coming election, these militant religious parties, which are quite anti-American, are not going to do particularly well -- Anderson.

COOPER: It's still shocking to hear how popular bin Laden and al Qaeda is in so many parts of Pakistan.

Peter Bergen, appreciate the report. Thanks.