

To weaken al Qaeda, strengthen U.S. humanitarian role

BY KEN BALLEEN

www.terrorfreetomorrow.org

Six years after 9/11, the working assumption of U.S. intelligence is that Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda have regrouped in Pakistan inspiring, if not executing, terrorist attacks around the world. Despite the American, NATO and Pakistani military campaign, how has al Qaeda managed to successfully reassert itself?

The answer is that al Qaeda's safe haven is built on a solid foundation of favorable Pakistani public opinion.

A recent nationwide survey in Pakistan by the nonprofit group Terror Free Tomorrow shows that a third or more of Pakistanis have a favorable view of al Qaeda, the Taliban and bin Laden. And almost half of all Pakistanis favor local Pakistani radical Islamist allies of al Qaeda-groups that the United States has designated as terrorist. There is virtually no support for any U.S. or Pakistani military action to stop bin Laden.

No wonder neither the United States nor the Pakistani government can acquire the on-the-ground intelligence necessary to capture bin Laden and defeat al Qaeda and the Taliban. That explains why Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently called for a substantial increase in funding for "soft power" assistance to prevent and end conflicts, including foreign aid and diplomacy.

It matters not whether one looks at Iraq or Pakistan or any other place where terrorist organizations seek support. If we fail in the battle for the hearts and minds of people in these lands, we fail in the battle against terrorism.

In some respects, the Pakistanis have pointed the way forward. Nearly two-thirds of Pakistanis said their opinion of the United States would significantly improve if American educational, medical aid and economic assistance increased. Indeed, after the American relief effort in Pakistan following the 2005 earthquake, Terror Free Tomorrow found 46 percent of Pakistanis had a favorable opinion of the United States. That since has dropped to 19 percent.

Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, shows how U.S. policy can make a positive difference. After 9/11, al Qaeda allies inside Indonesia mounted a series of brutal attacks in that country, in Bali and elsewhere. According to U.S. intelligence, al Qaeda planned to use Indonesian affiliates to launch an attack against Los Angeles.

Then the devastating tsunami hit Indonesia. The United States led an extraordinary international relief effort. Following the amazing work of our military, government agencies and service organizations, public opinion significantly swung in favor of the United States. Even three years after the tsunami, almost 60 percent of Indonesians surveyed nationwide said that it is American assistance which makes them favorable to the United States.

The improving opinion of the United States has been accompanied by a corresponding weakening in support for what are perceived by the Indonesian public to be the vanguard of the most radical anti-American views, namely bin Laden, al Qaeda and their local Islamist allies.

American aid is not the only reason that the public turned against support for radicals. Local victims of terrorist attacks and increased democratic participation inside Indonesia also contributed. But one of the most important factors in changing public opinion toward America and extremism, shown over a three year period in three nationwide Terror Free Tomorrow surveys, has been the dramatic humanitarian leadership role played by the United States.

The battle against extremism in Indonesia is hardly over. But the Indonesian military and police have racked up a string of successes against local terrorists -- vastly aided by the Indonesian public's change of heart. As the new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, concluded, the change of Indonesian public opinion is nothing less than "one of the defining moments of this new century."

Without question, the single American action since 9/11 that has reduced public support for extremism more than any other is direct humanitarian assistance from the United States to people in need.

That is at the core of the ONE Vote '08 campaign, a bipartisan grass-roots effort with over 2.4 million Americans to elevate the issues of extreme poverty and disease as key issues to American foreign policy. ONE Vote is pressing each presidential hopeful to commit to an American agenda of fair trade, debt relief and targeted resources to promote education, healthcare, clean water and food directly to those in most need worldwide.

As the American response in both Pakistan and Indonesia has shown, this commitment is nothing less than a commitment to also win the war on terror.

Ken Ballen is the founder and president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a Washington-based center studying public opinion toward extremism around the world.