

Neither 'Stingy' Nor Unpopular

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The usual rent-a-mob poured into Jakarta's streets Tuesday to protest Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit and remind Americans of how hated we are in places such as Indonesia. But here's something you might have missed amid the chants telling Ms. Rice to "go to hell": America's popularity in Indonesia has risen dramatically in the past year -- Gitmo, Abu Ghraib and Halliburton notwithstanding.

That's the conclusion of a remarkable poll conducted last month for the Washington-based NGO, Terror Free Tomorrow. Since 2003, the number of Indonesians with a favorable view of the U.S. has nearly tripled, to 44% from 15%. More Indonesians support the U.S. war on terror than oppose it: 40% to 36%, a first for a Muslim country. The number who oppose U.S. antiterror efforts has also declined sharply, to 36% from 72%. Admiration of Osama bin Laden has also dropped, to 23% from 58%.

The proximate cause for the changed Indonesian outlook has been U.S. relief efforts following the December 2004 tsunami, in which an estimated 167,000 Indonesians drowned. In the days immediately after the disaster, it was only the U.S. Navy that could get urgent relief supplies to the affected areas quickly. The U.S. government has since provided \$400 million in assistance to Indonesia and directly helped 600,000 people. Total American tsunami assistance is estimated by the U.S. at about \$2.6 billion, with the bulk of the donations coming from private sources. So much for the view that Americans are "stingy" with their foreign-aid giving.

Still, as the poll indicates, there remains plenty the U.S. can do to continue to repair its image among Indonesians, which first took a bath after bad advice from the International Monetary Fund plunged the country into a currency crisis in 1997. One good place to start would be the resumption of full-scale military cooperation, including weapons sales and officer exchanges, which the U.S. foolishly ended in the 1990s to protest Indonesian policies in East Timor.

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim nation and, after India and the U.S., the largest democracy. The values and interests we share -- in fighting terror and piracy, in promoting moderate Islam, and in encouraging economic development -- are obvious. It's past time they were reflected in the strength of our relationship.