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War on terror needs more humanitarian efforts

By Kenneth Ballen

WASHINGTON - It is time we heed what America's military leaders are telling us about the war on terror. Pentagon officials involved in writing the Joint Chiefs of Staff recently released counterterrorism strategy have acknowledged that "the American military's efforts to aid [2004] tsunami victims in Indonesia and to assist victims of Pakistan's [2005] earthquake did more to counter terrorist ideology than any attack mission."

Indeed, according to the Navy's commanding officer, Admiral Michael Mullen, the change of Muslim public opinion as a result of American aid is nothing less than "one of the defining moments of this new century." Admiral Mullen concluded: "Shame on us if, even through benign neglect, we allow those same opinions to turn against our best intentions again."

The statements of our military's leaders point to a dramatic reconsideration of the means necessary to prevail against global terrorists. Fortunately, recent history shows us exactly how we can help people who need help, and just as important, how to change public opinion favorably toward the United States, and against terrorists such as Osama bin Laden.

This means a commitment to following the path the US successfully forged last year in response to the tsunami that struck Indonesia and the earthquake that ravaged Pakistan. American assistance was direct, extensive, effective, and well-publicized on Indonesian and Pakistani TV.

For the first time since 9/11, both the Indonesian and Pakistani people - the largest and second-largest Muslim populations in the world - expressed a favorable opinion of the US, and at the same time, turned against support for Mr. bin Laden and terrorist attacks. It seems that if American efforts are focused on positive rebuilding and vision for the future, the foot soldiers for bin Laden and radical Islam will desert. Islamist extremism can indeed be effectively defeated in Muslim hearts and minds.

In fact, the number of Pakistanis who have a favorable opinion of the US doubled from 23 percent in May 2005 to more than 46 percent after American earthquake aid was received. According to a poll conducted by the nonpartisan not-for-profit, Terror Free Tomorrow, with fieldwork by ACNielsen Pakistan, for the first time since 9/11, more Pakistanis are favorable to the US than unfavorable.

At the same time, the number of Pakistanis who disapproved of bin Laden doubled at almost the exact same percentage as those who became favorable to the US.

The effects of American aid in response to the earthquake were clear: 78 percent of Pakistanis said that American aid to earthquake victims has made them favorable to the US - a figure that held even among bin Laden supporters.

The data from Pakistan is buttressed by similar findings from Indonesia. After the tsunami, 65 percent of Indonesians had a favorable opinion of the US as a direct result of American assistance, while support for terrorism declined in tandem.

Yet the most surprising finding is that this dramatic shift in Muslim public opinion has been and can be sustained over a long period of time. A nationwide poll by Terror Free Tomorrow just completed in Indonesia shows that one year after American tsunami assistance began, and despite the reports on Koran desecration and the eruption of violence over Danish cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad, Muslim public opinion has not only remained favorable to the US, but has increased as a direct result of American humanitarian assistance to the Indonesian people. Indeed, for the first time since 9/11, more Indonesians are favorable to the US than not.

The fact that even a year after receiving American help Indonesians continue to appreciate America's role is stunning proof of the sustained power of positive and substantial assistance to radically change Muslim public opinion.

No wonder "The National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism" released earlier this month by the Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that American humanitarian assistance is "often key to ... countering ideological support for terrorism [which is] the enemy's center of gravity."

While disasters on the scale of the tsunami and earthquake create unique problems and solutions, they also suggest a model for future American foreign assistance: aid based on positive humanitarian needs and delivered directly to people in need.

It is time we listen to our foremost military experts on what is truly required to win the war on terror. American humanitarian leadership is the proven path to winning Muslim hearts and minds. As the Navy's top officer Admiral Mullen said, "shame on us" if we fail to heed this message.

• *Kenneth Ballen served as counsel to the House Iran-Contra Committee, chief counsel to the Senate Special Committee on Investigations and the Speaker of the House, and is president of Terror Free Tomorrow.*