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Humanitarian aid: winning the terror war

Peaceful military missions are curbing anti-US feelings in the Muslim world.

By Kenneth Ballen

WASHINGTON

The flagship for the war on terror could well be the US Navy ship Mercy. But this Navy vessel is not armed for battle. Just the opposite: It is fitted for peace.

The Mercy is a fully equipped, 1,000-bed floating hospital, which returned in September from giving medical care and training to the people of Indonesia, Bangladesh, East Timor, and the Philippines. The US Navy, Project HOPE, and other volunteer medical personnel provided free medical care, including major surgeries, for nearly 61,000 needy patients.

Amid the uncertainty about the best strategy in Iraq and how to answer the growing threat of terrorism and extremism in the world, there is one American policy of the past two years that has proven successful time and again: humanitarian missions by the US military. This policy is pro-military, pro-American, pro-humanitarian, and antiterrorist. Most important, it is actually curbing anti-American feelings in Muslim countries.

In global public-opinion surveys, Terror Free Tomorrow, the nonprofit organization I lead, found that the US military's humanitarian missions to the broader Muslim world have directly caused a dramatic drop in popular support of terrorism and extremism.

The surveys also showed a corresponding rise in favorable public opinion of the United States.

Adm. Michael Mullen, chief of Naval Operations, recently announced that because of the overwhelmingly favorable public reaction to the Mercy's visit in Indonesia and Bangladesh - the world's most and third-most populous Muslim countries - the Navy is planning to continue and expand humanitarian missions by the Mercy and other hospital ships around the globe.

The American response to the devastating 2004 tsunami in Indonesia - led by the US Navy - resulted in favorable attitudes not only toward the US, but also concomitant declines in support for Osama bin Laden and suicide attacks. Similarly, American aid to Pakistani earthquake survivors, this time led by the US Army, caused overall support for the US to double in Pakistan, a critical ally in the war on terror.

According to Admiral Mullen, the desire to sustain this change of public opinion, as revealed by the surveys, was a critical factor in the Navy launching this most recent mission of the US Navy ship.

The Mercy's trip paid off and provided more than vital medical care and training. Terror Free Tomorrow's latest nationwide public opinion surveys in Indonesia and Bangladesh confirm the findings of its previous surveys in Indonesia after the tsunami and in Pakistan following the earthquake: Humanitarian missions by the US military continue to reap demonstrable and measurable gains in popular esteem.

These nationwide polls of Indonesia and Bangladesh conducted in August 2006, following the Mercy's visit, suggest that a remarkable 85 percent of Indonesians and 95 percent of the people of Bangladesh were favorable to the Mercy's mission.

The consensus approval of the Mercy mission by the people of both Indonesia and Bangladesh bridges political views. Whether they were anti- American and opposed to the US war on terrorism, or whether they supported Mr. Bin Laden and approved of suicide terrorist attacks, people were overwhelmingly favorable toward Mercy's mission. Indeed, 87 percent of those surveyed in Bangladesh said that the activities of the Mercy made their overall opinion of the US more positive.

The near-universal approval of the Mercy is a striking testament that tangible humanitarian aid from the US military can continue to improve public opinion of the US in Muslim countries.

In fact, Indonesians and Bangladeshis ranked additional visits by the Mercy as a higher priority for the US than stronger involvement in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Navy has heard the voice of the people in the world's largest Muslim countries and will launch additional humanitarian operations.

Congress and the American people must also listen. The US must support new and expanded humanitarian missions by the military. By demonstrating our common humanity and a benevolent side to American power, these missions have proved to be America's most successful weapon against extremism in the Muslim world.

• Kenneth Ballen is founder and president of Terror Free Tomorrow, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to finding effective policies that win popular support away from global terrorists.