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Killing missions in Kashmir: How Osama trains Pak militants in Afghanistan

S. Rajagopalan
(Washington, January 16)

A SPECIAL report in *The New York Times* from Panjshir Valley in Afghanistan details how the Taliban-controlled nation and base of Saudi terrorist Osama bin Laden has been training Pakistani militants for their killing missions in Kashmir.

"Muhammad Khaled Mihraban, a polite, soft-spoken 26-year-old Pakistani, thinks he has already killed at least 100 people. Maybe more; he isn't really sure," begins the report, captioned: 'Holy Warriors: Killing for the Glory of God, in a Land Far From Home.'

Mihraban, having decided to "consecrate my life to jihad" while studying Islamic law at Punjab University in Lahore, joined a Pakistani militant group that was fighting India in Kashmir. He was trained in Afghanistan, which he visited first in 1992.

Interviewing Mihraban, presently in the custody of rebels fighting the Taliban in northern Afghanistan, the *Times* report says that if international terrorism has a home, it is Afghanistan. It is the place "that comes closest to the extremists' ideal of a state ruled by the strict code of Islamic law".

"We learned how to plant mines, how to make bombs using dynamite and how to kill someone quietly," the paper quotes Mihraban as saying. Found to be a "gifted student", Mihraban was soon asked to train others in group camps near Khost.

Mihraban's inclination, however, was "to act, not teach". After a stint of waging war in Kashmir, he returned to Kabul to fight alongside the Taliban forces. Defiant even while in captivity, he vows to stay on and fight again for the Taliban. If asked, he would be ready to go to London, Paris or New York for terrorist killings.

Quoting estimates by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the paper says that some 50,000 to 70,000 militants from 55 different countries have been trained in recent years. The Taliban, according to the agency, permit a wide range of groups to operate in Afghan territory, from the Pakistani militants who trained Mr. Mihraban to Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda.

In the last six months, more than 100 men recruited by bin Laden and affiliated groups are said to have been trained at a camp near Jalalabad.

The Times quotes a United Nations official as saying that the Pakistani support had helped the Taliban turn the tide in its battle for control of Afghanistan. "The Taliban were doing quite badly at first. But there is no doubt that Pakistani support gradually turned the tide."

"There are also suggestions that Pakistani authorities have pressed students to fight for the Taliban. One relief worker who visited the Indira Gandhi Children's Hospital in Kabul in late June said that all of its 400 beds were filled by Pakistanis wounded at the front, some as young as 15..."

"Pakistan denies that it has sent soldiers to fight alongside the Taliban," says the *Times* report adding: "But diplomats, relief workers and Afghans interviewed in Kabul and Jalalabad insist that Pakistan has provided not only weapons, logistical and other assistance, but soldiers as well."

Taliban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil, too, has sought to deny that Afghanistan was harboring terrorists or those training them. According to him, the pressure to expel bin Laden from Afghanistan is "insulting and useless". Afghanistan has been bin Laden's home since 1996, when he was expelled from Sudan.



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Iraq gives \$ 95 million to relieve poverty in US

Julian Borger
(Washington, January 16)

PRESIDENT-ELECT George W Bush's plans to cut government aid to the poor, and let private philanthropists shoulder the burden is already reaping its reward.

It was announced yesterday that Saddam Hussein had donated \$ 95 million to impoverished Americans.

Despite a decade of biting international sanctions and a poverty rate of more than 50 per cent in Iraq, Saddam Hussein has apparently decided to mark the tenth anniversary of the Gulf war by sending humanitarian aid to America's inner cities and rural poor.

A statement put out by the Iraqi News Agency (INA) said a special commission would be set up to help supervise the distribution of the funds. Given the current state of relations between the two countries, it is unlikely that the US will allow Saddam's uniformed lieutenants to wander the streets of the Bronx or east Washington, distributing his dole.

The donation would work out to about three US dollars for each American living under the poverty line. The INA statement said the UN would be told of the donation, suggesting that its aid workers might help implement the programme.

The UN in New York said it had had no word from Baghdad about the donation, and its response would depend on where the money was coming from. Since the Gulf war, Iraq has been allowed to use the proceeds of its oil sales only to buy food, medicine and other essentials for its own people.

"It's unclear if this is money the government of Iraq has lying around or if it comes from the oil-for-food deal," the UN spokesman said. "If it is from the oil-for-food deal, then it would have to go before the Security Council sanctions committee, to see if it would be allowed."

The committee is still bemused by Saddam Hussein's previous philanthropic outburst, in December: The promise of \$ 950 million to help the Palestinian struggle against Israel. In the West Bank and Gaza they are not holding their breath. His earlier promises to send troops came to nothing.

But his claim to have so much cash to send abroad may end up hurting his efforts to have the sanctions lifted. Some Security Council members are said to have questioned whether the sanctions regime is tough enough, if he has so much money to give away.

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China out to fool Tibet's web visitors

John Gittings in Shanghai

CHINA HAS opened an English-language website on Tibet to reinforce efforts to counter unfavourable publicity abroad. It offers 220 megabytes of information about religion, culture, tourism, business — and the blessings of being part of China.

The Tibetan Buddhist priests it quotes have no truck with the exiled spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama. A "patriotic lama" called Nyima Cering says he abides strictly by Chinese law and accepts "the teachings of President Jiang Zemin". The site is described as "non-governmental", and while it follows the official Beijing line faithfully it tries to be human.

"For 15 Tibetan girls," it reports in its opening menu this week, "January 1 may never be forgotten as they realise their long-cherished dream of flying as stewardesses." They are delighted, in other words, to become the first Tibetans to work as cabin crew on the Chinese airline, which has been flying to Lhasa for more than 40 years.

Tibet's entry into the Internet world is hailed. "If you ramble about Lhasa," begins another item, "you will find many Netbars. It is said that Netfans can ... fast gain the latest information and be in touch with (the) outside betimes."

The site is run by the China Tibet Information Centre. Whether or not by coincidence, its name — tibetinfo.com — is similar to that of the London-based Tibet Information Network — tibetinfo.net — a much-quoted critic of Chinese policy.

"I suppose it is very flattering", Tibet Information Network director, Richard Oppenheimer, said. "The Chinese are entirely selective in what they have chosen, but it does contain some new material."

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Erotic fantasy factsheet

Reuters
(Paris, January 16)

More than three quarters of people around the world have erotic fantasies but less than half bring them to life, according to a poll released by a publisher of romantic novels.

Reputedly hot-blooded Argentines and Chileans led the way in the Harlequin Enterprises' survey which was released yesterday, with 95 percent of those polled in the two countries saying they had fantasies.

Japan was bottom of the list with only 50 percent of people there admitting to erotic flights of fancy.

Globally, 45 percent of people said they had acted out their fantasies and were generally satisfied with the result.

Roughly one third of those polled said they fantasised about their partners. Danish women were the most faithful, with 58 percent of them keeping their thoughts fixed on their man.

Only 15 percent of Argentines said they fantasised about their partners, while more than a third dreamed of having sex with a complete stranger.

According to the poll 28 percent of Greek men fantasised about work colleagues, while only four percent of French did.

Almost one in four people dream about going to bed with actors and actresses. Musicians, models and athletes also proved popular sex symbols, the poll said.

The poll, carried out last July, questioned 5,484 men and women, who were both single and in relationships.

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