The Washington Times

December 15, 2008 Monday

Mumbai's theological terror

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SECTION: COMMENTARY; A18

LENGTH: 1135 words

The history of mankind is filled with brutal evidence that fighting between enemy adversaries in the name of religion is not unnatural. Among the numerous precedents frequently highlighted are the assassinations by the Muslim radical Hashasheen of the Christian "infidels" in the Middle East between the 11th and 13th centuries.

The latest carnage in Mumbai perpetrated by Pakistani jihadists, killing in cold blood nearly 200 people, including 22 foreigners, and wounding hundreds more, has underscored once again the depressing reality that individuals, groups, and states have used religion as a violent tool by calculated cruel design, not by accident.

More specifically, malformed theological manifestations were at the root of the Mumbai attack. In the name of Islamic purity, extremists have aggravated interfaith suspicion with hateful propaganda, distortions, and specious references to a divinely-ordained "sacred war." Religiously inspired terrorism benefits from the long history of religious tension in India, which is both internal and external.

The first nourishment for psychological and physical violence is internal. India is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multicultural society with more than six decades of communal and ethnic confrontations. Terrorism has unfortunately claimed more victims in states like Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Tripura, Manipur, Nagaland, and Assam than anywhere else around the world.

One of the challenges facing the world's largest democracy is the stark reality that some local incidents evolve into intensified religious tensions with major factional conflagrations that engulf the vast country and its neighboring states. A case in point is the Dec. 6, 1992, Muslim-Hindu clashes triggered by destruction of the 16th century Muslim mosque at the Ayodhya in India's Uttar Pradesh state.

Hindus insisted the mosque was built on the birth site of the Hindu God Rama, a claim disputed by Muslims. This bitter controversy inflamed deep-seeded religious passions, resulting in widespread rioting and the deaths of more than 1,000 in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other countries.

External states, such as Pakistan, are also complicit in exploiting Islam in the service of a political agenda. That is, in its political conflict with the Hindu majority nation over the ultimate control of the Kashmir region now under India's rule, the Islamic neighbor has brazenly sponsored and supported anti-Indian terrorism.

Reportedly, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and other government agencies have provided logistical support to a variety of Islamic "liberation" and "revolutionary" movements, including military training, supply of weapons and operational help.

The most notorious is Lashkar-e-Taiba (LT), also known as the Army of the Pure and Righteous, that mounted the spectacular Mumbai operation. Pakistani-based, it is one of the largest and best-trained groups fighting to "free" Kashmir for Islamdom. For instance, in December 2001, the group assaulted the Indian Parliament building, and in July 2006, it carried out the costly train attack in Mumbai.

Members of LT are recruited from the graduates of the madrasses in Pakistan, where education in religious hatred is indoctrinating future Islamic "martyrs." Funding and other support for LT are solicited from the large Pakistani Muslim diaspora in the Middle East, Europe and North America.

Globalization of the Islamic dimension of the Mumbai incident is further evident when the attackers selected non-Hindu hostages, such as Westerners (especially Americans, British and Canadians), as well as Jews and Israelis. According to the autopsies conducted on the victims in the Chabad Jewish center, they were tortured before being killed.

Indeed, Pakistan's news channel, One Television, even provided "legitimacy" to the assertion that the Mumbai siege was planned and executed by "Hindu Zionists" and "Western Zionists." Other views in the Arab world have also claimed the "Zionists" are exploiting the Mumbai incident as an incentive for the United States to invade Pakistan.

Ironically, Muslim countries themselves face constant threats of instability from religiously motivated violence. Even Pakistan itself is not immune from Islamic radicalism. For example, after the Mumbai incident, clashes between two ethnic groups in Karachi killed 28 people and injured 150.

Furthermore, the deteriorating security situation in South Asia and, indeed, throughout the world, is linked to Osama bin Laden's loosely knit network of various affiliated terrorist groups, including LT. The theological-political foundation of al Qaeda, (a group also known as "the International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders") is crystal clear: to unite all Muslims and establish a government under the rule of a "divinely ordained" Caliph. Bin Laden's "holy" doctrine declares that in order for Islam to realize its former glory, "it is the duty of Muslims to prepare as much force as necessary (including weapons of mass destruction) to attack the enemies of God."

In sum, the spread of "sacred Islamic violence" is rapidly becoming one of the most serious challenges to regional and global stability. That threat, however, does not necessarily come from traditional Islam, nor from the majority of the Muslim population, which is dedicated to the search for social, political and economic progress. The threat comes from the distorted theological narrative spun by Islamic extremists who fancy themselves as jihadists.

Religion, and the concomitant beliefs of the world population, will always play a significant role in the affairs of state. The key question, then, is can Islam, and religion in general, ever serve as an effective instrument for advancing the cause of peace with justice? The short answer is definitely yes - if we have the will. Responsible religious leaders in India, Pakistan and beyond should actively seek both political and doctrinal dialogue.

A recent encouraging step in this direction is the Nov. 11-12, 2008, high-level conference on "culture and peace" held at the United Nations General Assembly. Though the role of "religion" was avoided in the dialogue among "faiths and civilizations," the gathering brought together adversaries such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. Clearly, religious tolerance and understanding are critical in defusing negative theological components in future political conflicts.

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LOAD-DATE: December 15, 2008

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper