

WORKING PAPER ON THE WAR ON TERROR: CHARITIES

Charities often carry out their humanitarian work on the battlefield. They engage in activities like evacuating and treating the wounded, aiding refugees, assisting those fleeing from the hostilities, and minimizing the suffering of the civilians who are caught in the crossfire. They cannot do these things without the cooperation of the belligerent parties. But they do them as institutions with transparency, accountability and financial oversight demanded of modern aid agencies.

Need for Faith-Based Charities

But looking back over the past few decades, there has emerged a double standard in evaluating the work of faith-based charities. When church organizations working in, say, the Southern Sudan offer their humanitarian assistance to the members of the separatist forces, no one sees them as exceeding their legitimate role or operating outside the sphere of legitimate humanitarian aid. However, similar humanitarian aid given by Muslim charities, whether it was in Afghanistan during the 80s, or in Bosnia, Kosovo, or Chechnya, is perceived as outside the sphere of humanitarian work, aiding terrorists. (See Senate Government Affairs Committee hearing, July 31, 2003.)

Impact on Providing Needed Services

These attacks have resulting in freezing of certain charities' accounts and the application of pressure to have charities closed down or their aid stopped. Indirect approaches include damaging the reputation of these organizations and intimidating those who would wish to assist them. All of this has seriously impaired the ability of these organizations to carry out their humanitarian work. Hundreds of thousands of orphans from the poorest of countries have been denied badly needed help. Poor communities have been denied potable water since irrigation projects have been suspended. Schools and religious centers have failed to materialize in areas that needed them. This should make us realize the added suffering when accusations are levied against faith-based charities by certain sectors within the American government and the American media.

Detriment to America's Political and Security Interests

It should not be difficult for us to see how this contributes to a negative image of America in the eyes of those who rely on the humanitarian aid that those charities provided. Furthermore, in a more direct impact on America's security interests, removing credible institutions demolishes any vestige of regulated, audited and properly managed charities. Instead, as contributors and recipients will always have the need and alternate means to donate and receive, respectively, unregulated methods using cash will re-emerge as the chosen way to distribute aid. This is unacceptable in the 21st Century and our country's counter-productive policies leading in this way must be reversed.