

Terrorism and America: Five Asia Pacific Perspectives

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Asia Pacific

I S S U E S

Analysis from the East-West Center

No. 55

October 2001

The U.S. Congress established the East-West Center in 1960 to foster mutual understanding and cooperation among the governments and peoples of the Asia Pacific region, including the United States. Funding for the Center comes from the U.S. government with additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, corporations, and Asian and Pacific governments.

The AsiaPacific Issues series contributes to the Center's role as a neutral forum for discussion of issues of regional concern. The views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Center.

SUMMARY Three weeks after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., five journalists—from India, Fiji, Japan, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka—visiting the East-West Center on an exchange program accepted an invitation to write about the attacks and “America’s War on Terrorism” from the perspective of their own country. Their responses are frank and sometimes anguished. “As global terrorism evolved into a beast out of control, America enjoyed the good life,” writes a Sri Lankan. The United States has declared a war on terrorism but, an Indian asks, is it only because now “the grief pours out of American eyes”? In Japan, resentment over America’s increasing “unilateralism” coexists with an unprecedented willingness to send troops overseas, says a writer for The Mainichi Newspapers. A Fijian broadcaster notes that calls for international action are accompanied by “unease over violent retaliation.” The mixed emotions described by many are dramatically evident in predominantly Muslim Indonesia where, says a newspaper editor, anti-American demonstrations defied President Megawati’s assurances of support for the United States.

Sri Lanka has been the victim of bloody ethnic conflict since 1976

AMANTHA R. PERERA, SRI LANKA
Journalist, The Sunday Leader

For the past several weeks, the world's attention has been totally dominated by America's new war: the war against terrorism. The only superpower in the new world has declared war on fanatics who destroy innocent lives. It took a sacrifice of some 5,000 lives on American soil for the United States to arrive at the decision. Meanwhile, countries such as Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have been plagued by the very same scourge for the past 25 years or more. All this time the peoples of these countries felt that America watched from the sidelines riding the high moral horse or, worse, manipulated their situation to its advantage.

Sri Lanka has been a victim of a bloody ethnic conflict since 1976. The conflict has claimed close to 75,000 lives, both civilians and combatants. It has displaced close to a million people. The entire North East Province of the country has been rendered a war zone, disrupting lives irrevocably. The Sri Lankan war is no longer a small-arms combat. It has evolved into a full-blown conventional war with the civilian community held hostage. Children as young as 12 years are being brainwashed and led to the battlefield as cannon fodder. A truck bomb exploded in the Sri Lankan financial capital in January 1996, killing close to 100 people and injuring scores more. Just six weeks before the September 11 attack, the international airport in Colombo was attacked, causing \$1 billion in damage. Countless incidents of atrocities committed by the government forces have been reported, ranging from the rape and murder of schoolchildren to human rights abuses that have become routine. The individual numbers might pale in comparison to September 11, but the end result is the same. Sri Lanka has been rendered a society innured to violence and death. The situation is the same in countless other countries in the region.

Throughout all this, the United States has maintained a stoic distance. While global terrorism evolved into a beast out of control, America enjoyed the good life—until the beast struck at its very heart. Why did the United States look the other way? That is the

question that millions of Sri Lankans, both Sinhalese and Tamils, ask today as U.S. warplanes strike in Afghanistan. If the United States had led military action against global terrorism much earlier, or at least promoted a global campaign, the picture would not be this bloody all over the world.

Even today, after the horrendous images of September 11, most Sri Lankans doubt the sincerity of the United States when it claims that the campaign is against global terrorism. They fear that once the perpetrators of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks have been dealt with, it will be back to business as usual for the Americans, while smaller players like Sri Lanka will be left to fend for themselves. The beast that confronts us today cannot be done away with like that. It needs a change of understanding, of outlook. It needs America to change the way it looks at countries like Sri Lanka—poor, racially divided, and prone to political machinations from outside.

America has to realize that all suffering, whether it takes place at the World Trade Center or in the Vanni jungles of northern Sri Lanka, is the same. U.S. policy cannot turn a blind eye to it. The lives that were lost on September 11 call on us to look inward and realize where we went wrong. If we are to make the world a better place for our children, we need to do a lot of soul searching. That has hardly begun. Maybe it never will.

UNALOTO OFA KAUKIMOCE, FIJI
Senior Journalist, Fiji Broadcasting Corp., Ltd.

When news broke on local radio and television stations in Fiji about the terrorist attacks in the United States, residents frantically tried calling relatives and friends in the United States to find out if they were safe.

People stared in awe at their television screens as they watched the graphic and heart-wrenching images of the collapse of the twin towers, the damage to the Pentagon, and the rescue efforts. The only words one could hear were “*isa*” or “*oilei*,” which are Fijian words for “*oh my gosh*.”

The disbelief that permeated Fiji was evident among the government and the people.

The Fijian government was very quick to condemn what it called “wanton acts of terrorism,” and Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase dispatched an urgent message to President Bush pledging Fiji’s support for antiterrorist action.

These sentiments were shared by a wide cross section of the Fiji community who paused at regular intervals during the days immediately after the attacks to pray for those killed. Churches and schools throughout Fiji began their daily routine with similar prayers.

In the capital, Suva, a candle vigil organized by the municipal council and a range of government and nongovernmental organizations gathered at the historical Sukuna Park in the heart of the city to remember the victims.

While emotions were running high and local residents feared for the safety of their relatives and friends in the United States, Fiji’s economists were busy analyzing the impact the attacks and any retaliation would have on the Fiji economy.

Fiji’s Reserve Bank governor, Savenaca Narube, concluded that the impact on Fiji would be marginal. The tourism sector, however, would bear the brunt of any adverse impact, with a huge drop expected in U.S. tourists to Fiji. Garment exports to the United States from Fiji were also likely to be affected. And delays in airfreight between the two countries were also expected.

Inflation is likely to be moderated by the combined effects of weaker global demand and a possible rise in oil prices. Fiji’s Reserve Bank, the Finance and Trade Ministries, and the Employers’ Federation are closely monitoring the continuing effects of the terrorist attacks and where necessary are providing revised projections.

Meanwhile, public reaction was very swift, with people calling for a quick end to terrorism. There were also calls for world leaders to work together through the United Nations and other umbrella organizations to rid the world of terrorism.

There is, however, unease over violent retaliation by the United States and its allies and concerns have also been expressed about a possible third world war

(prophecies by several “visionaries” have contributed to these public concerns).

Fiji residents are constantly in contact with their relatives and friends in the United States enquiring about their welfare and safety. There have even been appeals for relatives to return home to Fiji, which many consider safer because it is far away from the United States, and from the Muslim countries that are thought likely to engage in any warfare.

There is also grave concern in Fiji for the safety of our soldiers serving on UN-sponsored peacekeeping operations in Lebanon, the Sinai Peninsula, and other Middle East countries where they could be the target of Muslim extremists.

HARRY BHASKARA, INDONESIA
Managing Editor, The Jakarta Post

The official reaction of the Indonesian government to the September 11 attacks was condemnation. President Megawati Soekarnoputri, visiting the United States right after the attacks, told President George Bush that Indonesia would assist Washington in its fight against global terrorism.

On an unofficial level, the picture was not so positive. Anti-American outbursts erupted in Jakarta, with militant groups burning American flags and staging regular protests in front of the U.S. Embassy. The same thing occurred at the U.S. Consular Office in the East Java capital of Surabaya. As the days wore on, the domestic scene deteriorated.

The anti-American protests spread to a number of cities. In the Central Java city of Surakarta, militant groups held street rallies and threatened to expel Americans once the United States attacked Afghanistan. They came in hordes to top hotels in the city trumpeting their messages on banners hung in side streets near the hotels. They demanded to see registration lists and checked for American guests.

Hundreds of Muslims in a number of cities vowed to go to Afghanistan to assist their fellow Muslims should the United States attack that country. They registered their names and held fund-raisers.

There is grave concern in Fiji for our soldiers serving on UN peacekeeping missions in the Middle East

There were reports of individual threats against Americans and a rowdy crowd rocked a busload of Western tourists in a small town outside of Jakarta.

All of this created fear and apprehension, not only in Americans but in people of other Western nationalities. A number of embassies, including the United States', issued travel warnings to their citizens. Some sent their nonessential staff home.

These anti-American demonstrations defied Megawati's public assurances. And although the security apparatus protected the Western embassies well in Jakarta, the police appeared hesitant to take action against the militant groups.

To outsiders, Indonesia must have looked like a country enraged by America and unmoved by the loss of nearly 5,000 American civilians, including 800 Muslims.

This perception was exacerbated by the near absence of denunciation by public figures, other than the president, of the fierce protests. These continued unabated even after the United States made it clear, just days after the attack, that it was not waging a war against Islam.

This unsavory response to the attack against humanity in the United States does not augur well for the image of Indonesia, the biggest Muslim country in the world, and indeed goes against the very meaning of Islam, which is "peace" or "submit to God."

The surge of these very militant groups, some of whom carry names such as "Defender of Islam," has been a relatively new phenomenon in Indonesia's politics, though the groups have existed for as long as the nation. They are small in number but exceptionally active and outspoken, in contrast to the silent majority who oppose their threats and intimidations.

And the protest rallies do have a connection to local politics.

The militant groups first came to the forefront at the height of Christian-versus-Muslim conflicts (starting in January 1999) in the Maluku, a group of islands in eastern Indonesia. They have since flourished, with some of their members begging for alms in side streets in big cities, including Jakarta.

There have been reports that the rise of Islamist politics, which began in 1998 with the fall of Soeharto, has some militants hoping to seize power from Megawati in early 2002. The groups reportedly have close associations with the old-guard politicians, who are members of the anti-reformist groups and remnants of the Soeharto government. Whether these reports are true remain to be seen.

What is more certain is the dominance of tolerant Muslims within the millions of Muslims in Indonesia who account for about 90 percent of the country's 210 million people. This is reflected in the fact that two major Indonesian Muslim organizations, the highly respected Muhammadiyah and the Nahdlatul Ulama, disapprove of the threats and intimidations against Americans.

Nevertheless, political jockeying by those who feel they represent the aspirations of the Muslim people is intensifying, including within the military. In this context the September 11 attacks were easily used to advance narrow political interests.

TAKESHI YAMASHINA, JAPAN
Staff Writer, Foreign News Department,
The Mainichi Newspapers

When the terrorist attacks occurred on the morning of September 11 in New York and Washington, D.C., the time in Japan was just past 10 p.m. Within minutes, shocking images began pouring into homes in Japan as major television networks cancelled their regular programming and switched to live coverage of the unfolding events. Tens of millions of people in Japan found themselves glued to their television sets for hours that day.

My initial impression of the footage was, "It's like a movie; this cannot be true." And many people I talked to later said that they felt exactly the same way.

By the time it dawned on me that what I was watching was not an accident but an act of terrorism, thoughts that I assume would sound callous and even egregious to some Americans began welling up in my mind. I soon learned I was not alone in these thoughts.

Political jockeying by those who feel they represent the aspirations of the Muslim people is intensifying

Many people in Japan are disappointed that some in the United States have drawn a parallel between the terrorist attacks and what happened on December 7, 1941

“I guess this happened because the Americans meddled in the Palestinian problem,” murmured one of my colleagues as he kept his eyes on the horrible scenes of destruction. The cab driver who took me home after that day’s morning edition went to press declared, “It was a natural consequence of America’s own deeds in the past.” A Diet (parliament) member wrote on her website that “it was no surprise that America got hit,” only to retract that comment the next day as she was inundated with waves of criticism for her “lack of consideration.”

Why did we feel that way, at least initially? Shortly before the attacks, a lot of people in Japan complained about the United States’ “unilateralism” in its foreign policy. And I’m sure we were not alone in feeling that way. Since President Bush took office in January of this year, Washington has effectively ditched the Kyoto Protocol, for whose introduction so many countries around the world, including Japan and Europe, toiled for so many years. The United States also started a headlong dive into the introduction of a new missile defense system and efforts to cancel the Antiballistic Missile Treaty despite strong opposition from Russia and China and skepticism among its allies. As a result, the perception that Americans are bullies who dictate to the rest of the world appeared to be gaining momentum in many parts of the globe, including Japan.

This is not to say that the people of Japan felt America deserved the pain and sadness inflicted by the terror of September 11. On the contrary, many expressed sympathy toward the victims and their families; hundreds of people made spontaneous visits to the American Embassy in Tokyo after the attacks, laying flowers and cards with sympathetic and encouraging words for those who suffered.

And many people are now talking about doing something active to contribute to the international fight against terrorism. One proposal is sending Self-Defense Forces (SDF) to help the antiterrorism coalition’s military operation against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Polls show that a majority of Japanese people support sending the SDF overseas although it is a radical departure from post-war policy.

I must say, however, that many people in Japan have been disappointed by the fact that many senior government officials and members of congress in the United States are drawing a parallel between the terrorist attacks and what happened on December 7, 1941, in Hawaii. Even President Bush mentioned it in his speech to Congress on September 20. Indeed, both were surprise attacks; nevertheless we cannot help but be disappointed that more than a half-century of cordial relation between Japan and the United States was not enough to heal the old scars.

GAUTAM CHIKERMANE, INDIA
Executive Editor, Intelligent Investor

What are India’s views, opinions and perspectives on September 11? If terrorism is an international problem, as defined by the world’s most powerful nation, then my question is, what are we doing talking about the Indian angle? India’s angle, like any other country’s angle, should be an international angle. Many nations, one voice. But that’s a utopia. So there will continue to be a U.S. angle, an Indian angle, an Afghani angle, a Palestinian angle, and so on. Complicating the issue will be bilateral and trilateral angles—and their intersections with other bilateral and trilateral angles.

My second question is related to the first: why now? Is it because the mangled bodies are mostly American, the grief pours out of American eyes, the graveyards of sorrow will occupy American hearts? What about Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in India? What about Israel and Palestine, if not the root then the excuse for the September 11 bombings? Will the United States support antiterrorist activities in these areas? If yes, how, given that Israel and Pakistan are its partners? What about its own terror—the one million Afghans running toward the Afghanistan-Pakistan border as food supplies run out, the estimated million or more innocent Iraqi citizens, women, children, and elderly included, that have died since sanctions were imposed? If fighting terrorism is an international problem where the United States needs international support, it must remember that it’s not a one-way street to success.

The United States has left India feeling isolated as it showers Pakistan with financial gifts

What's in it for India, is my third question. What made India one of the first countries to offer help? Probably to get the United States on its side, and against Pakistan. Unfortunately, Pakistan has a better geopolitical amphitheater where this war-play is being staged. Hence, though the United States has removed sanctions from both countries, it has left India feeling isolated as it showers Pakistan with financial gifts, fully conscious of that country's track record of supporting terrorism. But as one U.S. diplomat told me recently: "They (India and Pakistan) must not treat their own relations with the world outside as a 'zero-sum' game, where the advantage to one country comes at a cost to the other." There is some wisdom in this, as there is the danger that both countries will fall into the trap of the age-old divide-and-rule policy, this time executed by the United States. Working out solutions that have roots as far back as five decades is important to both nations. It can be done too—look at improvements in relations between France and Germany, Brazil and Argentina, South Africa and Mozambique. But if India feels cheated because

of U.S. support to Pakistan when that country sponsors terrorism in India, it is justified.

My fourth question relates to cause. Who are these terrorists? Do they come from one country—are all terrorists Afghanis? Do they belong to a single religion—are all terrorists Muslims? Can they be classified at all? Is the IRA a terrorist organization? If so, why did Bill Clinton embrace its leader and term the Irish situation as one of "freedom fighters"? This time, Palestine seems to be the issue. Osama bin Laden said on television in October: "I swear to God that America will never dream of security or see it before we live it and see it in Palestine." The Taliban has stated that it is U.S. support of Israel that has incited the attacks. Will resolving the Palestine problem end this madness? If so, I am optimistic that there is also hope for the problem India faces in Kashmir. But if terrorism is a route to getting power, there is no hope.

Unfortunately, my questions will not be answered until the war ends. And today, it seems never-ending.

About this Publication

The *AsiaPacific Issues* series reports on topics of regional concern.

Series Editor: Elisa W. Johnston

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Telephone: (808) 944-7145
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ISSN: 1522-0966

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The five journalists contributing to this paper were participants in the Fall 2001 Jefferson Fellowships program. Dedicated to promoting through the news media better public understanding of cultures, issues, and trends in the Asia-Pacific-U.S. region, the program is the only one of its kind in the United States for mid-career print and broadcast journalists. Since 1967, more than 350 journalists from 27 countries have participated in this program, which includes professional dialogue and study at the East-West Center in Honolulu and field travel through major cities of the Asia Pacific region or the United States.

The Jefferson Fellowships are supported by a grant from the Freeman Foundation.

For more information on the program, please contact:

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