

Some Charities Suspected of Terrorist Role

U.S. Officials See Muslim Groups Linked to bin Laden and Others

By JUDITH MILLER

Government officials investigating a decade of international terrorist attacks say they have found a common thread, Islamic charities and relief organizations that they suspect are being used to move men, money and weapons across borders.

American officials said Osama bin Laden, the Saudi exile charged with masterminding the 1998 bombings of American Embassies in East Africa, relied on at least nine of the groups in his recent operations.

Other charities and relief groups, the Americans said, have been linked to a recent plot to bomb historic and tourist sites in Jordan, the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and terrorist attacks in Egypt against tourists and Government officials.

"These charities and relief groups are a crucial part of terrorism's infrastructure," said one official who monitors terrorism closely. "Money people give for worthy causes should not wind up buying explosives or phony passports. But we still know too little about how Islamic fundamentalists use and abuse these groups."

Most of the 6,000 Islamic groups operating worldwide are considered legitimate and provide emergency relief in dangerous and desperate places with the support of friendly states. In addition, the officials said, the charities are often unaware that terrorists have used them as cover.

"Most of these groups do some good works in some places," one official said. "And often, only a few officials or a single chapter involving a small part of the charity's leadership or resources is being used."

Although the administration has previously investigated alleged links between individual Islamic charities and specific terrorist groups, this is the first time that it is scrutinizing a block of such groups to determine whether they are being used, wittingly or not, by Islamic terrorist networks. As such, officials say, the inquiry is a major expansion of the government's counterterrorism efforts.

Israel has been pressing the United States for years to spearhead an international crackdown on Islamic

charities and private relief groups. But officials said Washington had been reluctant to interfere in a domain safeguarded by constitutional guarantees of free association and separation of church and state. In addition, officials said, they lacked evidence that could be used in public court proceedings.

In recent months, American officials have circulated within the government a list of more than 30 groups that they are examining for links to terrorism, at least two of which are based in the United States.

Last month, a team of officials led by the Treasury Department visited Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and other Arab states to discuss specific charities with their Middle Eastern counterparts.

In Canada, officials said they planned to seek new legal authority to confiscate the assets of charities that acted as fronts for terrorism. This measure, the officials said, is part of a broad antiterrorism package that the Government will soon propose to Parliament. Canada cut off government financing in 1997 to Human Concern International, a Canadian-based group, for what official documents call the group's "terrorist connections."

That group is also being investigated by the United States, American and Canadian officials said. The director of the charity, Kaleem Akhtar, denied that his group had terrorist links and said it was "totally wrong" to defame groups that did such good work.

American officials said their investigations into the role of such Islamic charities and relief groups had been prompted by recent terrorist attacks and plots. The officials acknowledged that the scrutiny was politically and diplomatically sensitive.

American officials said charities could provide excellent cover for terrorist groups, because relief workers are welcomed almost everywhere and their shipments of supplies are rarely checked by border guards or the police.

Discovering the origins and supporters of such charities may be difficult, investigators said. While the United States, Canada and several European states require taxexempt charities to file at least annual reports listing their assets, expenditures and officers, many states, including several in the Middle East, do not.

One instance in which investigators said they believed that the role of charities was crucial was the bombings of the embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, crimes that killed more than 200 people and wounded thousands.

Prosecutors said material seized from the Nairobi office of the Mercy International Relief Agency includes records of calls to the cellular telephone of Mr. b:m Laden. Another document found at the office, dated two weeks before the bombings, refers to "getting the weapons. from Somalia."

Mercy, based in Ireland, was one of five private associations that Kenya closed weeks after the bombing. The government said those groups had "deviated from development objectives" and "posed a serious threat" to Kenya's security.

In recent days, officials disclosed that a roommate of one the men charged with plotting to bomb targets in the United States had worked for Mercy in Dublin. //

✓ The State Department stepped up its efforts to investigate the charities last year, after officials involved in counterterrorism found that the United States government had inadvertently helped support questionable charities. The State Department had included a charity that counterterrorism officials say has ties to Sudan's governing Islamic party on a list of 50

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groups through which Americans could aid Kosovo refugees. The State Department has identified Sudan as a terrorism sponsor.

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The charity, the Islamic African Relief Agency, also received two grants in 1998 worth \$4.2 million for work in Mali from the State Department's Agency for International Development. The grants to the charity, which is one of the 30 being scrutinized, were cut off in December at the State Department's request on grounds that they were not in America's "national security interests," an A.I.D. official said. The organization's president said he was appealing the decision.

Speaking from Columbia, Mo., where the charity has been registered since 1984, its director, Ahmed Mubarak, said that his group had nothing to do with Sudan" and that Washington had never accused it Of any terrorist-related activity. "We are Simply trying to help People wherever they need help. Mr. Mubarak said."

The list of more than 30 groups with suspected terrorist ties includes two in the United States\$ the Global Relief Foundation, Inc. and the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development, in Richardson, Texas.

American officials have been looking into Holy Land since the mid-90's. Some government officials recommended that the group be prosecuted in 1997 for supporting Hamas, the militant Islamic group. But others opposed the effort, fearing that it would expose intelligence sources and spur public criticism of the administration as anti-Muslim.

The inquiry appears to have been revived. Responding recently to a lawsuit by Steven Emerson, a journalist who follows militant Islamic groups, the State Department said it not make documents about Holy Land public because the group was the subject of "an ongoing law enforcement proceeding."

A lawyer for the group, Donya C. Witherspoon, said Holy Land had no involvement with terrorism and had been very careful that its donations cannot be used by terrorist groups. "Their whole purpose and emphasis is antiterrorist," Ms. Witherspoon said.

Contending that it was a front for Hamas, Israel closed the charity and four others in May 1997. An Israeli official said the government had provided "thousands of pages of information" about the group to American officials, urging them and other Western governments to close it.

A lawyer for Global Relief, Stanley Cohen, called the investigation of that foundation a "scurrilous attack" and "another of the government's pathetic attempts to sully committed Islamic organizations."

Reports filed for 1998, the most recent available, said Global Relief, of Bridgeview, Ill., had an income of \$1.7 million and distributed "food, clothing, relief supplies" to refugees, flood victims and orphans.

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