

Discussion with Richard Barrett

Ray Suarez talks to Richard Barrett, Coordinator of the United National al-Qaeda and Taliban Monitoring team about the delicate balance governments must strike by trying to close channels of terrorist funding, while still affording Muslims the opportunity for charitable giving and delivering aid and development around the world.

RAY SUAREZ (RS): Islamic charities and American officials don't exactly agree that the US approach to regulating charities has been a success. What's the UN's assessment of the American approach to regulating Islamic charities since the September 11th terrorist attacks?

RICHARD BARRETT (RB): It's a very sensitive issue, in my opinion. The obligation on all Muslims to give zakat, as they call it, to give to charity, is a very real one. It's an obligation they can't deny, along with the other 4 pillars of Islam. And the whole point of giving zakat, or alms giving, is to do so sort of privately and without a lot of fuss and bother. You're not meant to sort of, show off a lot. There's a great deal of informal collection and giving. I think that any regulation that's imposed from the outside of course is going to be a little bit unwelcome. It's going to put people's hackles up a little bit.

There's no doubt at all that Muslim countries have tried to regulate the flow of arms to groups, particularly to terrorist groups of course, because it's a very obvious way of collecting money by terrorist groups. It's not difficult for them to claim that they're supporting orphans and widows and disadvantaged people like that.

It's very difficult for the donor to check where his money's going. So some sort of regulation is obviously in order but I think it has to be very carefully done and cannot easily be prompted from outside.

RS: Tell us more about the UN efforts to address these challenges – how does your team work with the US and other countries?

RB: We have in the UN an assets freeze, which applies to various people on a list of al-Qaeda and Taliban, who are considered by the Security Council to represent a threat to international peace and security. Terrorists are very adept at getting money. We must not forget that the cost of mounting an operation is relatively small. If you remember the attempt not so long ago by al-Qaeda in Yemen to implant bombs in printer cartridges, which were then to be flown towards the United States and blow up in flight – they boasted that that whole operation cost them \$4,200.

So to collect that sort of money is not difficult and almost impossible to stop. But what we have to do as the United Nations, is to make everybody feel like they're working together and to share information wherever we can about new ways terrorists are using to raise money, and to look at the weakest links and try to strengthen them, by assistance or advice.

RS: We've moved smartly into the digital age, yet at the same time banking secrecy regulations have been under pressure. How has modern technology helped hide bad money, dirty money, or helped expose it?

RB: I think the best ways to move money without anybody knowing what you're doing is probably the old fashioned way, by having somebody with a suitcase of cash cross a border. That seems still to be very popular. But beyond that, I think the new payment methods – for example, you mentioned the digital age – payment through cell phones and cards on which you can store value, I think actually does allow people more opportunity to regulate the flow. There is a sort of trail to be found afterwards.

RS: What are the important areas that still need to be improved on?

RB: There is a big problem – people give money and they rarely know where it's going. They don't ask, it's not their business, perhaps, to ask – they just believe the cause is a good one. The charity may be perfectly legitimate – an above-board charity, but there may be people involved in it, or alongside it, who can take some of that money and use it for these bad purposes.

And it's not just regulating the flow of money but regulating the way that these not-for-profit are managed. Some sort of vetting of their boards of governors – some sort of assurance that the people who are involved in both ends of the transaction are people with a reputation. People who are going to do the right thing.

RS: Over the past few decades, Muslim NGOs have grown in number, they've grown in reach, and they've grown in their ability to administer aid. How can countries, and the international community as a whole, encourage the good things these charities are doing, while also ensuring security – how do you avoid throwing out the baby with the bathwater?

RB: There is a problem of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. If you think that charity is mainly going to people who need it, and then you deny them that source of income, well the likelihood is they're going to be very fed up with that and that might turn them to extremism. So you really don't want that. The key is to accept that there is a certain amount of risk – to try to limit that risk to the greatest extent possible. That means monitoring on the ground and a certain amount of checking about what the charity is actually doing.