

Thursday, May 1, 2008

U.S.: Iran Named As Top State Sponsor Of Terrorism

The U.S. State Department has issued its annual report on terrorism around the world. The report concludes that Iran is the world's "most-active" state sponsor of terrorism due to its continued support for Hizballah in Lebanon, the Palestinian militant group Hamas, and training and equipping Shi'ite militants in Iraq.

The report also lists Syria, North Korea, Cuba, and Sudan as among the top state sponsors of terrorism in 2007. The report says there was a 16-percent increase in terrorist attacks in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2007 due to resurgent extremist activity there and in Pakistan.

The State Department also says attacks in Iraq dropped between 2006 and 2007 but still accounted for 60 percent of worldwide terrorism casualties. The report concludes that the Al-Qaeda network and its affiliates remain "the greatest terrorist threat to the United States and its partners." RFE/RL Washington correspondent Andrew F. Tully spoke about the report with Dell Dailey, the coordinator of the State Department's Office for Counterterrorism.

RFE/RL: In your presentation at the State Department, you referred to Iran as the world's "most-active" state sponsor of terrorism during 2007. Why?

Dell Dailey: They support the Taliban in Afghanistan. They support militant militias in Iraq. They support Hizballah, obviously, and they support Syria in its activities in Lebanon. So those four areas show that Iran's busy. It's busy meddling. It's busy in the terrorist business. And since they are a nation state, there's a certain amount of omnipotence that you can't do with a nation state that you might be able to do with a nonstate actor. So that's kind of why we put them at the very top.

RFE/RL: What was the state of terrorist activity in Iraq during 2007, and what groups are responsible?

Dailey: Since Iraq has turned out to be a very, very active battlefield, and [with] the success of our Iraqi armed forces and the presence of coalition forces, there's a pretty powerful conventional [military] presence. Now this compels the insurgents, the militant militias, and Al-Qaeda in Iraq to go to what we assume as nonstandard or asymmetric warfare techniques, like suicide bombing and terrorist attacks, because they can't go straight at a unit with forces on the ground because coalition forces are so powerful. They work that to their advantage and they go after both the civilian population and the coalition forces. And about 5,500 Iraqis -- civilians, nearly all Muslims -- [have been] killed by these terrorist groups. So because there's that much activity going on, we think that Iraq turns out to be the centerpiece for the activity.

RFE/RL: Afghanistan, of course, was the safe haven for Al-Qaeda when it mounted the attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001. What was the state of terrorism there last year?

Dailey: The Taliban, as a result of a very aggressive drug-production process in some of the agricultural regions, have been able to revitalize their fundamentally unpopular position with all this money. Because drug money can buy people, buy weapons, buy information, buy supplies, buy protection, and the Taliban have taken drugs to do this for them. And with that they've had a resurgence.

Our advantage is that the [UN's International Security Assistance Force] -- with the rapidly and vastly developing Afghanistan military and Afghanistan law enforcement -- we've been able to go after these folks. So there's been a lot more contacts -- combat actions -- that increase the numbers as showing that there's a lot more activity going on.

But don't be misled. Many of those [contacts] are driven by the aggressive action by both ISAF and the other coalition forces. So my take is, there's more activity going on, we're driving most of it, but the fact that the Taliban got their hands on this massive drug-growing capability really turned out to be a disadvantage for us.

RFE/RL: Outside Afghanistan, were there significant terrorist movements in the former Soviet states in Central Asia in 2007?

Dailey: Kazakhstan has identified 14 organizations in one of its declaration orders as foreign terrorist organizations. Uzbekistan has a pretty repressive government and as a result has, I would say, been pretty aggressive on terrorism against itself. But we don't see a universal, uniting, overall terrorist effort in Central Asia right now.

RFE/RL: Overall, are governments improving their abilities to fight terrorist groups? Or are these groups developing faster than governments can cope with them?

Dailey: Unequivocally, the governments are improving in their abilities to fight terrorism. For example, we're improving our counterterrorism finance capability [to freeze terrorists' bank accounts with] the establishment of the Financial Action Task Force. Countries are passing their counterterrorism legislation to go after terrorism. And with that counterterrorism legislation in place, they now have moral justification to go after terrorism with these rules, with these laws, with this legislation.

Find them, put them in their judicial system, have good evidence, have good prosecutorial presentation, have good judicial review and oversight, and have appropriate type punishments if they're found guilty, and then, of course, incarceration systems to put them in, and then systems to rehabilitate them afterwards. These are all going on right now that weren't going on five or six years ago. So the countries are becoming better in that area.

Law enforcement. Information sharing on an international basis. Capacity-building for both military and police systems have all dramatically improved. So it's our preparation as individual nations with bilateral support from stronger nations. And our multilateral institutions -- for example, the UN's counterterrorism efforts and some of its Security Council legislation and its General Assembly counterterrorism strategy -- all of that makes it more powerful for us to fight terrorism -- by a country, in that area regionally, and internationally. So we certainly are better off.