

## Where is bin Laden?

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What could you buy with \$6 billion?

You could finally rebuild the New Orleans neighborhoods that Hurricane Katrina destroyed. For almost six years, you could provide a daily meal for every one of the 36 million Americans who live below the poverty line.



Or, you could give all of it to the Pakistani government in the form of military aid and accomplish absolutely nothing. For more than seven years now, billions of American government dollars, expense reimbursements of about \$90 million a month, have sluiced directly into the Pakistani Treasury, instantly becoming "sovereign government funds," as a new government report puts it. Once there, the United States has no control over how the money is used. All of this money, about \$6 billion so far, is intended to pay for counterinsurgency operations against al Qaeda and Taliban sanctuaries in the tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan.

After seven years, al Qaeda has established a terrorist-training and planning center there. The 2008 National Intelligence Estimate said al Qaeda "has regenerated its attack capability and secured a safe haven in Pakistan."

Meantime, the Taliban have begun applying fundamentalist Islamic law in the tribal areas they now control. They have shut down schools for girls, closed barbershops and music stores, just as they did in Afghanistan when they ruled that country. In short, seven years and \$6 billion later, the terrorist group that carried out the 9/11 attacks has grown ever more comfortable and secure in its new Pakistani home. There, Washington fears, their leaders - including Osama bin Laden - are planning another attack on the United States. Meanwhile, the newly elected Pakistani government is negotiating a truce with these militants and has already pulled most of its troops from the area.

This information comes from newly published federal government reports. No one in Washington is debating it. Last month, in fact, Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staffs, acknowledged that if the United States managed to pinpoint Osama bin Laden's location in the tribal areas, he was not sure Pakistan would give permission to attack him. That, Mullen said, is "open for discussions with the new government."

Despite all this, the money keeps flowing. The Bush administration has budgeted \$900 million for the program this fiscal year, saying it is "a critical tool in our joint effort with Pakistan to constrain the assumption of sanctuary by extremists in western Pakistan."

That last statement came from the Department of Defense just three weeks ago - even after major reports from the State Department, the General Accounting Office and the nation's intelligence agencies this

spring all showed that the war there is lost, the money wasted.

All of this could have been predicted. In 2006, five years into the military assistance program, government auditors discovered that the United States was not even providing any advice or strategic direction for the Pakistani military. Washington bureaucrats were just handing over the money - "shoveling it," as one congressman put it - crossing their fingers and hoping something good might come of it. Nothing did.

Last month, U.S. Rep. Howard Berman, D-North Hollywood, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, complained that Washington was not providing meaningful guidance even now.

"It's appalling that there is still no comprehensive interagency strategy concerning this critical region," he said.

In a report published last week, the Government Accountability Office, quoting Pentagon officials, said the Pakistani army, still today, is "neither structured nor trained for counterinsurgency" missions.

Last year, for the first time, the Pentagon did raise questions about a few of the reimbursement requests Pakistan had provided, for expenses totaling about \$80 million. Military officials, testifying to Congress, insist that their audits will be more thorough in the months ahead. But none of them has explained exactly what the new money is intended to accomplish - given that, for all the good it did, the \$6 billion spent so far might just as well have been flushed down the sewer.

For a long time, Bush administration officials had quietly explained that they continued handing over the money because it helped prop up Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistan president, their supposed ally in the war on terrorism. But even that explanation rings hollow today. With his political party out of power, Musharraf sits in Islamabad, now little more than a figurehead.

So, like many other failed programs launched during the Bush presidency, this one will likely chug along untouched until a new president takes office - wasting \$900 million more along the way.

What could you buy with \$900 million?

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