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International Disaster Reduction Conference

Terrorism and Risk Management

Davos, Switzerland – *Speakers at the weeklong International Disaster Reduction Conference IDRC in Davos have often spoken hopefully of driving the "last mile" to combat natural and man-made hazards that become disasters. Yet a "terrorism and risk management" panel admitted on the IDRC's final day that global coping strategies haven't completed even their first mile in stamping out world terror.*

"It's a long haul, and we're only in phase one" admitted social scientist Ulrich Schneckener from the Berlin-based German Institute for International Politics and Security. Like other human security experts, he stressed the adaptability of Al-Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups in outwitting counter-terrorism measures.

Italy's Milan-based deputy chief prosecutor, Armando Spataro, has spent more than 30 years pursuing terrorists including his country's home-grown Red Brigades. But he agreed that the "new terrorism" poses immense problems for Italian police – largely due to local cells' mobility and lack of a rigid command structure. In pursuing today's cells, Spataro said, police must never forget that democracies respect the rule of law. This means observing the human rights of those arrested in a manner not always honored by countries leading the "war on terrorism". "We shouldn't end inquiries by dismissing our basic laws," he told the experts on hand here. "We can't claim that those suspected of terrorism fall somewhere else where human rights don't need to be respected. We mustn't damage this concept of democracy that we want to export to the rest of the world." But respect for the rule of law does handicap Italian police and security forces throughout Europe, he said. It means that those obliged to fight terrorism have to do so "with one hand tied behind their back."

Spataro's French counterpart on the panel, Jean-Louis Bruguière, has spent more than 20 years analyzing organized gang crime in Paris. But that was largely "old terrorism". The new transnational brand calls for new strategies, he told the ICRD. "I still say 'the threat is ahead of us,'" he said. "No one is spared. And it's like an earthquake. It's always fermenting underground. That's what makes it so diabolically difficult."

The risk-management experts also heard former United Nations investigator Detlev Mehlis recall his team's nine-month probe following the 2005 Beirut bombing that assassinated former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri and his aides. Mehlis had spent 25 years as a Berlin prosecutor before leading the UN's first such inquiry into a politically motivated act of terrorism. According to the German lawyer, he and his quickly assembled group of 30 police specialists approached the task objectively, despite protests from Syria that Mehlin's team had a USA-Israel bias. "We set about the job by assuming there were 10 closed doors before us," he said, using an analogy suggested by a Swedish team member. "We (the UN International Independent Investigating Committee known as UNIIIC) opened those doors one by one. We found nothing behind the first nine, and finally only the Syrian door remained."

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In due time the investigators found that the Syrians had “lied, procrastinated, and tried to mislead us,” Mehlin said. It lead UNIIIC to implicate Syria “beyond reasonable doubt” in the assassination. The inquiry continues in Beirut under Mehlis’ successor, Belgian Serge Brammertz.

“There is no panacea in fighting world terrorism,” insisted panel chairman Uwe Schulz, Germany’s former attorney-general in Karlsruhe. “But maybe we can still put our foot on the brake.”

With this “terrorism and risk management”-day the IDRC Davos 2006 closes. The Davos Declaration, a self-commitment of all participants, expressing their will to actively support and implement the conference recommendations, was prepared. It will be finalized in the next days.

The IDRC followed up the 2005 United Nations-sponsored conference held in Kobe, Japan – a gathering on combating natural disasters largely restricted to government officials. The Davos meetings also address man-made catastrophes such as war and terrorism. Those attending include nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector. Four organizing partners are cosponsoring the IDRC: the United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR), the Global Alliance for Disaster Reduction (GADR) and the Global Disaster Information Network (GDIN); and it is locally organized by the Swiss Federal Research Institute WSL, Davos.

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