

# Has human life lost its meaning?

VIEW



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*Or perhaps we are now living in a world where we deem human life to be expendable; a world where unless we see mass graves, we are not truly touched by the horror of murder. Perhaps we are no longer able to connect with the pain of an individual and feel it as our own*

SPAIN WAS ACCUSED OF GIVING IN TO terrorists when its new Socialist government pulled its troops out of Iraq, following the overthrow of the Aznar regime a few days after the Madrid bombings. Now the Philippines is under fire from the US for having withdrawn its tiny contingent from Iraq in order to save the life of one of its nationals.

Other members of the US-led coalition forces have suffered losses due to their presence in Iraq. Japan, South Korea, Italy and the US itself have had their nationals taken hostage and beheaded when it became clear that they would not withdraw their forces from Iraq. Yet these

countries have stayed the course, vowing to fulfil their commitment to the reconstruction process, to secure Iraq for the final phase of its road to true self-determination. To cave in to the terrorists' demands, they claim, would be to hand them unqualified victory, to let them win this war on terror without end.

And no doubt, they are right when they say that terrorists are not to be negotiated with, but rather to be dealt with. For giving in to their demands simply fuels the fire of their extremism, pushing them to the limits to secure their end objectives, knowing full well that this tactic will deliver them anything and everything they want.

Furthermore, while no nation welcomes its nationals coming under threat, many claim it is both unrealistic and naïve to expect a government to implement a reverse in its long-term foreign policy goals, simply to save the lives of a few individuals. Governments have to look at the larger picture and try and secure the greatest good for the greatest number.

Japan sent troops to Iraq against the will of the Japanese people. Prime Minister Koizumi refused to pull out Japanese troops in order to save the life of one of its citizens, saying that Tokyo could not afford to kowtow to terrorists. But, in reality, he was perhaps more concerned with maintaining his country's foreign policy status quo with the US. Japan is in the midst of trying to redefine its security strategy. It is considering reversing a constitutional provision which forbids its forces from taking part in armed conflict and peacekeeping missions overseas. Although Japan already has the NATO security umbrella protecting it against rogue states like North Korea, it still needs to build up its defence capabilities in case the alliance fails to honour its defence commitment. Furthermore, it is making a bid for permanent membership of the UNSC, where US support will carry a lot weight.

As for South Korea, another country that had a national taken hostage and murdered in Iraq, it wants maintained US military presence on its soil, again to protect it from the North Korean threat.

The Philippines is the only country to

have pulled out its forces and saved the life of a national. It has been severely berated by the US for having given in to the terrorists. And many believe that country will pay a higher price for its withdrawal in the future, especially as it has already been the target of Islamist militancy. President Arroyo has been accused of giving in to domestic pressure and not looking at the larger picture.

However, can the Filipino move really be described as cowardice?

The US claims to be the leader of the free democratic world. Indeed, the West claims credit for having come up with the concept of the individual and the notion of individual human rights. Washington is hell bent upon turning Iraq into a beacon of democratic light to shine throughout the Middle East. In its arrogance, it has proclaimed it is engaged in teaching the Iraqi people about the foundations of democracy and democratic rule. Yet what kind of democracy is this, when the rights and safety of a government's own nationals are forsaken in favour of other political ends? Is this the lesson that the US and its allies truly want to 'teach' the Iraqi people? That national governments prefer to play to the tune of other, more powerful nations, rather than defending their own nationals?

Of course, governments must set out their foreign policy objectives and try their best to fulfil them. For it is understood that a country's foreign policy is devised with the good of the nation in mind. But what of a state's responsibility to safeguard the interests and rights of their citizens? Where on the list of priorities does this come?

I believe the Philippines took the right course of action. Admittedly, it is not perhaps a large player on the world stage, but the principle remains the same. It made a decision and pulled out its troops ahead of schedule and saved the life of one of its nationals. I, therefore, disagree with those who claim that the threat of death to one individual should not be enough to reverse governmental policies. If an individual cannot rely on his own government to protect him when the time comes, then what

hope is left? Sometimes it is the smaller picture that we need to look at.

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But is it really letting the terrorists win if we give in to their demands in order to save lives?

Iraq is increasingly becoming a bloodbath. The insurgents are now blurring the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. We hear that India, Kenya and Egypt are the latest countries to have had their nationals taken hostage. None of these countries have troops deployed in Iraq, but they do have their nationals there working for foreign firms.

A recent editorial in *The Hindu* (July 23) suggests that withdrawing troops as well as civilians is not tantamount to giving in to demands of terrorists: "the principle that governments should not succumb to the demands of terrorists does not apply in this case.... The occupation forces and their Iraqi quislings alone categorise as 'terrorists' the guerrillas who are recognised as resistance fighters by the rest of the world. The resistance also appears to represent the true aspirations of Iraqis since its warriors live amidst the people of the country while the members of the interim government of Prime Minister Iya Allawi hide behind the protective shield of the occupiers".

So perhaps it is about time for the coalition to actually see beyond the bullying tactics of the insurgents and to start listening to their demands, to see what they really want. But they already know the answer. They want all foreign forces as well as civilians to leave Iraq. They want Iraqi prisoners to be set free. The insurgents cannot match the military technology of the US and its allies, so they target its manpower, literally. But it seems that the insurgents have missed the mark. They have not realised that for many of the 'great powers', the value of human life has lost its meaning.

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