

Eliminating poverty will not end terror, it will make terrorism that much more difficult to promote

ONE of the more interesting debates that has arisen since the spectre of terrorism invaded the global consciousness just over six years ago (on "9/11") is the one about poverty and terror. Some have argued, perhaps a bit too simplistically, that terrorism is caused by poverty and that the eradication of poverty will lead to the elimination of terror. Certain development advocates have been particularly assiduous in purveying this line, no doubt in reaction to the even more simplistic discourse of those who argue that terrorism is a form of evil, divorced from any understandable "root cause", that must be ruthless-

support for terror attacks on Israel is lower amongst the poor and unemployed people than amongst the relatively better off Palestinians (students, professionals, merchants). The same is true, they showed, for supporters of the Hezbollah in Lebanon and of the extremist, even racist Gush Emunim in Israel. So, when doctors and engineers participated in the failed bomb assaults in London and Glasgow this summer, Krueger was not surprised. He told the Wall Street Journal: "Each time we have one of these attacks and the backgrounds of the attackers are revealed, this should put to rest the myth that terrorists are attacking us because they are desperately poor. But this misconception doesn't die."

My London-based Indian friend, Salil Tripathi, a thoughtful analyst of such issues, concurs. He wrote in the

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good reasons to eliminate poverty. But we should not expect terrorism to decline as a result."

And yet — I am tempted to say, "not so fast, my friends".

Beyond simple connections:

Of course eliminating dire poverty will not, in itself, solve our problems in this

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age of terror. The pilots of 9/11 were not poor; not only were they educated and reasonably well off, their pilots' licenses could have guaranteed them comfortable middle-class lives. But those like me who focus on the factors that make terrorism possible are not drawing so sim-

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ple a causal connection as to suggest that poverty causes terrorism. My own argument is a little more complicated. It is, first, that poverty helps create the conditions that provide succour and sustenance to terrorists, who can scarcely work in isolation: they need support,

bases, safe havens, supplies, allies, and they find these amongst a general population that is broadly alienated from the world order the terrorists are attacking, an order that denies them hope. Yes, it is not just poverty at work here. Those who support, applaud and orchestrate terror-

Terrorism is a weapon of asymmetrical warfare; it is the instrument of the weak against the implacable power of a State system that enrages them. It has been used by anarchists in 19th-century Russia, Irish nationalists in 20th-century Britain, Basque separatists in 21st-century Spain; and we have not, I fear, heard the last of its use by the advocates of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka

ism are not driven solely by a sense of economic injustice. A sense of oppression, of exclusion, of marginalisation, also gives rise to extremism, and this comes particularly to people who see no other hope of overturning the political dispensation that alienates them.

Second, terrorists need a rationale for their actions — a narrative of injustice to inspire their pawns, the suicide bombers and their ilk, and to win broad sympathy for their cause. That rationale is most easily found in tales of poverty and suffering seemingly created by an unjust world

order. If we can eliminate poverty, we would significantly dent that rationale, and dilute the support base for terrorism.

It is sadly true that other factors will continue to spawn terrorists. My good friend Nasra Hasan, a Pakistani former colleague of mine at the UN, wrote a remarkable article for the New Yorker in

2001 in which she suggested that indignity, political humiliation and a sense of desperation about the possibility of bringing about political change were the main motivations for would-be Palestinian suicide bombers. (She came to this conclusion by interviewing several terror-recruits in Israeli prisons.) Terrorism is a weapon of asymmetrical warfare; it is the instrument of the weak against the implacable power of a State system that enrages them. It has been used by anarchists in 19th-century Russia, Irish nationalists in 20th-century Britain, Basque separatists in 21st-century Spain; and we have not, I fear, heard the last of its use by the advocates of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka.

A goal to work for: So ending poverty will not end terror. But it will make terrorism that much more difficult to promote. If we can create a world in which all people have access to — at a minimum — the opportunity to live beyond starvation, to receive an education, and to have realistic hopes for a better future, including the possibility of some say in their own political arrangements, we might be able to stop the lugubrious litany of reflections on terror each September 11. That would be a positive goal to work for, in India and around the world. COURTESY THE HINDU