

Periscope

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Training New Recruits to Kill

The suicide at-tack that nearly hit U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney last week may signal worse to come in Afghanistan. The Taliban announced recently that it has recruited hundreds of willing martyrs, who are now training for a spring offensive.

Whether they have the right stuff remains to be seen. The Taliban recruits mainly young, poorly educated, native Afghans, says Reuven Paz, an Israeli expert on radical Islam. But recent research shows that age and education help to make a better bomber. Efraim Benmelech of Harvard and Claude Berrebi of the RAND Corp. recently analyzed 151 Palestinian suicide attacks from 2000 to 2005. They found that a 25-year-old bomber averages five more victims than an 18-year-old, while a college-educated attacker will likely kill six more than a lesser-educated peer. The educated are also 50 percent less likely to get caught prior to detonation. And females are just as deadly as males.

This applies in Iraq, too, where the average age of suicide bombers is between 25 and 27. Most received a university education, and some have come from prestigious families.

Although research on suicide bombers is more thorough than ever before, experts warn that relying on profiles could be risky. "Whether someone is successful as a suicide bomber has less to do with their age and more to do with whether they're hooked up to people that have a good plan, good intelligence," says Evan Kohlmann, a U.S.-based terrorism expert. He says the Taliban has vastly improved on this front, in part by adopting the Iraqi tactic of filming and glamorizing bombing missions as a recruiting tool. "It's amazing the impact this propaganda has," he says. "It becomes easier and easier to recruit." And that may give the Taliban its pick of martyrs for future attacks.

—Barrett Sheridan

THAILAN

Emerging Evidence

Has Thailand fallen off the investment map? The recent coup by officers with a pastoral vision of a self-reliant nation is said to be scaring off investors. Last week the Finance minister resigned in protest. But look closer.

Not all investors are running. Those from Singapore and Malaysia are cutting back, but in January the Japanese invested \$318 million, up 100 percent from last January. China's stake rose sevenfold. Thailand is now a barometer of investor moods, with big players ignoring politics, staying in for the long haul. The rub: the junta may, too.

DEMOCRACY

Big Man Walking

On a continent infamous for Big Man rule, the United Nations is trying to push power to the villages. In a trial run in Tiby, Mali, the U.N. Millennium Village Project is granting the few hundred villagers \$250,000 over five years and the help of Ph.D. -wielding experts to develop their own plan to attack poverty aid. Together, they are working out ways to encourage kids to study, fertilize barren fields, distribute mosquito nets and build a new school and health clinic. Tiby will be a test case for the government of Mali and other nations—Senegal, Nigeria and Ghana—where leaders are open to shifting power to the countryside. For states that have been top-heavy since colonial days, this is radical. But Tiby special envoy Changa Diarra is optimistic. "We'll put in a system to leave poverty behind," he says. "There's no limit for us in Tiby."

—Elizabeth Dickinson

Myth vs. Fact

Americans are notoriously anti-smoking, but Barack Obama—an occasional puffer—is proving that smoking can still be sexy.

MYTH: There's nothing more off-putting than the hoarse baritone of a smoker.

FACT: Smoking does indeed dry out vocal cords. But "many famous voices in history have pathologies that are part of their vocal signatures," says David Witsell, the head of Duke University's Voice Care Center, noting that the smoking-induced nodules on Johnny Cash's vocal cords helped create his unique sound.

MYTH: Health-obsessed Americans would never elect a smoker.

FACT: Although the White House has had a no-smoking policy since Bill Clinton's cigar era, Obama would be in good company—Franklin Delano Roosevelt's cigarette holder helped add to his mystique.

MOVIES

To Boldly Go ... On?

Fans of the "Star Trek" franchise love forward-looking stories, but for a while now they've had to live in the past. Trekkers flocked to Christie's auction house this past October, snapping up more than \$7 million worth of props and costumes from the show. The Christie's auction highlights the franchise's obsessive fan base and rich mythology. But does "Star Trek" have a future? That question will get an answer in 2008, when the as-yet-untitled 11th "Trek" film is scheduled for release. J. J. Abrams, the man behind such hit television shows as "Lost" and "Alias," is in talks to direct. The film's screenwriters, Alex Kurtzman and Roberto Orci, are not new to reviving iconic franchises. The pair wrote this summer's live-action "Transformers" movie as well as "Mission: Impossible III." Speculation on the film's plot is rampant, and the writers would neither give cast details nor confirm rumors that "Trek" XI will be a prequel, focusing on Capt. James Kirk's and Mr. Spock's early days. Box-office profitability of "Trek" films has declined, and "Trek" XI has reportedly split the fan base. "This is the most pressure we've ever faced," Orci says. "Star Trek" will live long—whether it prospers remains to be seen.

—Joshua Alston

SECURITY

Navy Seals

The latest U.S. plan to boost security involves—dolphins and sea lions? The U.S. Navy recently announced it may use the animals to detect and seize seaborne attackers at Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor in the state of Washington. The animals will be deployed primarily at night, when humans—even with detection equipment—tend to be less effective. Fitted with an electronic beacon that alerts security teams upon contact with a swimmer, the dolphin could save the day. The fast-swimming sea lion will carry a cuff tethered to the security team that it can clamp to a swimmer's leg, allowing the humans to reel him in.

—Marc Bain and Jessica Ramirez

Reality Check

Doctors have long believed that children who went blind early in life had little hope of ever learning to see. But a new study by researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology shows just the opposite—that the brain remains malleable until about the age of 6, and at that point, sight can usually still be restored. Researchers hope that knowledge will help the more than 1 million blind children around the world.

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