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9/11 costs hard to count

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service



Fire crews spray water on the Pentagon after an airliner crashed into the building in this Sept. 11, 2001, file photo. (CNS photo/Hyungwon Kang, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- Quantifying the costs of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States is a bit like trying to get your hands around the ocean.

Where to start is the first hurdle. Some costs can be tangibly measured in human lives lost, number of injuries, dollars spent and jobs changed or lost. They can be tallied in numbers of people who have fled their homes for safer lands or the amount of government funding diverted to or away from certain programs.

Then there are the intangibles: human rights in the United States and abroad that were weakened or ignored in the interest of security; the moral standing of a nation diminished by the acts of waging preventative war or engaging in torture; the loss of people's sense of well-being and peace; the suspicion with which some people now view Muslims or Arabs.

Even the facts that one might expect to be easy to measure -- how many people have been killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, for instance -- are difficult to nail down. A website called

<http://icasualties.org> keeps fairly up-to-date figures of U.S. and coalition deaths for the two wars, including government contractors. As of mid-August, it had a count of 4,792 U.S. and coalition military deaths in Iraq and 2672 in Afghanistan.

But, as pointed out in a comprehensive report, "Costs of War," published by Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies this summer, it's harder to pin down how many civilian contractors, Iraqi and Afghan troops have been killed or injured. Figures for the number of noncombatants who have been killed or wounded are especially elusive. One website, www.iraqbodycount.org, estimated in early August that between 102,000 and 112,000 civilians had been killed in that war.

Death tolls in the two wars are but one way of looking at of the costs to the world of the 9/11 attacks, however.

Scott Appleby, director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame, told Catholic News Service that the "fraying of the moral fabric of our nation" comes to his mind as one of the more significant costs of 9/11.

Appleby cited a "rise of the new McCarthyism," with discrimination against Muslims and elements of their faith, as "demonizing a whole religion based on terrorism committed by a very small number of people."

"This has been a big cost to American political and civic values, and has led to profiling of foreigners, which goes to the heart of the immigration debate," he said. A growing American isolationism, typified by "a defensive attitude toward the world, a narrowing of the vision of this country to 'us vs. them,' has betrayed the best of our foreign policy tradition," Appleby said.

Some of the rhetoric and tone of U.S. response immediately following the 9/11 attacks helped create the impression that the United States was now at war with Islam, Appleby said. "It was 'us vs. them' and 'you're with us or against us,' and 'Operation Infinite Justice,' that set an unfortunate tone," he said.

(Operation Infinite Justice was the original name of the U.S. military response to the 9/11 attacks. Muslim groups complained that the title too closely resembled the Islamic teaching that only Allah can provide "infinite justice," however, and the program's name was changed to Operation Enduring Freedom.)

Though some of the official government rhetoric "was eventually retracted, that set the tone for a lot of the news coverage," Appleby continued. Radio and television talk-show hosts played up that approach, "then Islamophobes seized on 9/11 and its consequences to hammer their opponents politically," he said.

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"Eventually President (George W.) Bush got on the right talking points, that we are not at war with Islam," Appleby said, but the residual effects of that initial backlash at Muslims have never gone away.

President Barack Obama has shown some "political courage" in reaching out to Muslims internationally and within the United States, said Appleby, "but unfortunately that has been swamped by the vitriolic political culture, so he's been unable to fulfill the promise of his efforts. That's partly not his fault. We need more political leaders to call the haters out."

In an essay on civil liberties for the "Costs of War" report, Lisa Graves, executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, wrote that the events of 9/11 were used by "political opportunists" to "sell the

nation two wars in the Middle East, to vastly expand the budgets of military and intelligence agencies, and to launch the most technologically sophisticated and wide-reaching surveillance system ever deployed in human history. Instead of the nearly global unity in condemning al-Qaida immediately after that September morning and the wide support for America, the nation will greet the 10th anniversary of that day weaker in almost every way."

Graves went on to list a range of measures used domestically and abroad that have curtailed individual rights: from a roundup of more than 1,000 U.S. citizens and immigrants, many of whom were detained in secret without charges, to wiretapping and other data-gathering, much of it directed at Muslims, Arabs and South Asians; and treatment of detainees, including with torture, rendition and use of secret evidence.

Other sections of the Brown University study detailed social costs affecting Muslims that ranged from discrimination and bullying in schools to investigations of Muslim charities.

More broadly, it estimated the cost of the wars themselves at between \$3.2 trillion and \$4 trillion, including the cost of dealing with long-term care for veterans and paying interest on the borrowed money used to finance the wars.

It also touched on the costs of environmental damage, long-term effects on veterans and their families, the continuing financial hit on the U.S. and global economies, and the deaths of more than 130 journalists while covering the wars, among other topics.

Pat Johns, director of staff safety and security for Catholic Relief Services, said little about the CRS mission and work has changed since 2001 but security is now a bigger part of everyday life for its staff around the world.

The nature of the work of CRS means its personnel are in some of the world's most dangerous countries, including Sudan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, said Johns, so security is an ongoing worry.


"Even in the most calm of locations there are threats," he said, so in every country where CRS operates one employee is assigned and trained to coordinate local security.

Since 2001 CRS has pulled out of Iraq, Johns said, though that was less related to 9/11 than to general security problems where the agency was operating near Basra, in southern Iraq. "We couldn't get anything done, anything at all, without factoring in some kind of security problem."

CRS had actually begun focusing on peacebuilding as part of its work before 9/11, Johns said, and those efforts have become even more important.

"Right after Rwanda (had a brutal civil war) in 1994, we came to the conclusion that if we were going to operate where there are groups hostile to each other, we should work on peacebuilding," or all the relief and development work CRS normally does would be at risk in the next flare-up of hostilities, he explained.

"9/11 hasn't changed what we do," Johns said. "But we have invested a lot of resources in peacebuilding."



NCR will be posting stories on the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks this week. Look for these stories, among others:

- 9/11 costs hard to count -- in lives, dollars, rights or security, by Patricia Zapor
- Interfaith relations seen as both better, worse, since terror attacks, by Mark Pattison
- Men central to Pennsylvania 9/11 events find strength in Catholic faith, by Bruce A. Tomaselli
- Fallen 9/11 priest emerges as an icon for gay Catholics, by Daniel Burke
- On 9/11, preachers find no easy words, by Lauren Markoe

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