Muslim Pop Artists Lead Youthful Resistance to Islamic Extremism

By J. Michael Waller

Al Qaeda has identified one type of enemy that it can't fight against: Muslim rock stars. U.S. intelligence discovered evidence that the terrorist group had considered murdering top Egyptian performing artists for being "infidels" but decided against it for fear of creating a youth grassroots backlash from Arabs.

That decision not to kill shows the sheer power of an underappreciated weapon in the war of ideas. Just as jazz and rock music were credited with fueling grassroots resistance to Soviet communism, popular culture is making a stand against Islamic extremism.

Pakistani superstar guitarist Ali Zafar illustrates the youthful resistance movement by posting two quotes prominently on his blog. "God does not change the condition of any people unless they themselves make the decision to change," reads the first, taken from the Quran 13:11. The second is attributed to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.: "You will have to repent in this generation, not only for the words and actions of the bad people, but also for the appalling 'silence' of the good people."

The 27-year-old Zafar, son of two professors at the University of Punjab, is unabashed about his Muslim faith and his conviction that, more than anyone else on earth, innocent Muslims are the greatest victims of Islamic extremism.

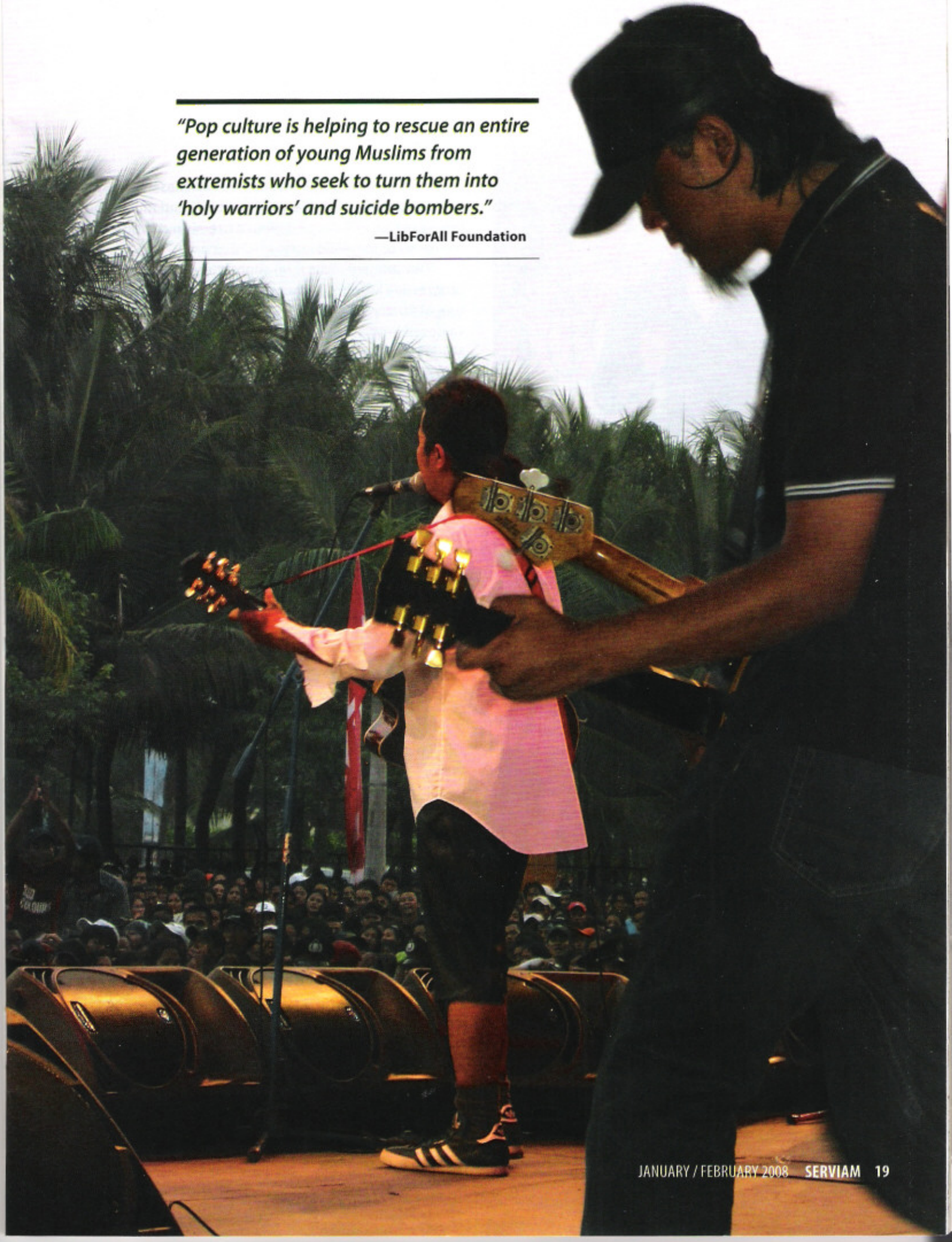
Last year Zafar joined seven other top Pakistani artists to cut a music video to rally young people against terrorism and the extremist Islamic ideology that drives it. The song, "Yeh Hum Naheen," is in the Urdu language; the title means "This Is Not Us" or "We Are Not That." Done in a low-tech Bollywood style that's popular with the intended audience, the six-minute video was recently released in the United Kingdom after its smash success in Pakistan.

Waseem Mahmood, a Pakistani-British author and media consultant, conceived of "Yeh Hum Naheen" to be reminiscent of Bob Geldof's Band Aid and Live Aid concerts. He says his British-born children were sick of how Islamic extremists were radicalizing young people and trying to mainstream militant distortions of Islam. The goal was to inspire a popular resistance to extremism.

The low-budget music video attracted an impressive number of top performers—eight of Pakistan's top 10. The production was very much a family affair. The video is "consciously simple," says Mahmood, whose adult children not only inspired the project but helped produce it. "For me the glamour of the video was in assembling the biggest star cast ever seen in Pakistan in one single shot, something that had never been achieved before," Mahmood says.

At a time when the U.S. and British governments were flailing in their efforts to counter the extremist narrative

LibForAll Foundation



"Pop culture is helping to rescue an entire generation of young Muslims from extremists who seek to turn them into 'holy warriors' and suicide bombers."

—LibForAll Foundation

Photo by Niluh Djopmanggolo

LibForAll Foundation Chairman and CEO C. Holland Taylor and Indonesian rock superstar Ahmad Dhani at a 2006 music awards ceremony. Dhani sits on the LibForAll Foundation board.

around the world, Mahmood's personal initiative made a big difference in a volatile nation. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes dismissed the performance when briefed on it, and did nothing to promote it.

The market showed how badly the State Department misjudged the cultural message. "Yeh Hum Naheen" went platinum in Pakistan and was such a hit that EMI Records re-released it with English subtitles for the Pakistani diaspora in the U.K., and Mahmood is planning an Arabic version.

Resistance in World's Largest Muslim Country

Meanwhile, the most popular rocker in the world's most populous Muslim country had already been building a cultural resistance movement of his own.

"Pop culture is helping to rescue an entire generation of young Muslims from extremists who seek to turn them into 'holy warriors' and suicide bombers," according to the LibForAll Foundation, a North Carolina-based nonprofit founded and chaired by American telecom executive C. Holland Taylor. "LibForAll's mission is to encourage the growth of peaceful, tolerant and free societies—built upon a foundation of civil and economic liberty and the rule of law—in order to reduce religious extremism and discredit the use of terror worldwide.

"Our primary focus is on supporting moderate and progressive Muslims in their efforts to promote the culture of liberty and tolerance, while preserving the positive values of local, native traditions throughout the entire Muslim world."

Taylor, who speaks fluent Indonesian, teamed up with two of the most culturally influential leaders in Southeast Asia: a senior statesman and a superstar pop singer likened to Bono of the Irish band U2.

The statesman, Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, was the first democratically elected president of Indonesia, who for years has led the world's largest Muslim organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama, which claims nearly 40 million members. Wahid has been resisting the aggressive and militant strains of Arab-inspired Islamism, from the subversive

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Muslim Brotherhood to openly pro-terrorist Wahhabi Islamism, promoting peace, tolerance and brotherhood with people of other religions.

The performer, Ahmad Dhani, plays an edgy guitar as leader of Dewa, the most popular rock group in Southeast Asia. Like Bono or Geldof, Dhani is a thoughtful artist with an activist global vision. Attracted by Taylor's ideas, he serves on the board of LibForAll.

Armed with his own studio and multiplatinum popularity across Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia, Dhani and Dewa took on the terrorists after widespread atrocities against Muslims and Christians in the eastern Indonesian provinces of Maluku and Sulawesi in 2004. Dhani, whose band includes Muslim and Christian members, satirized the killers, an Islamic terrorist group allied with al Qaeda called Laskar Jihad (Warriors of Jihad) in an album titled "Laskar Cinta" ("Warriors of Love"). The album had no title track, so in late 2005 he recorded a single with the same name,

which EMI Records released in early 2006 on Dewa's smash-hit album, "Republik Cinta" ("Republic of Love").

EMI also bankrolled the production of "Yeh Hum Naheen." One of the four largest recording labels in the world, the British company and its subsidiaries have signed on a variety of big performing names in various genres, from Nat King Cole, Frank Sinatra, and the Kingston Trio to the Beatles, Pink Floyd, Queen, Kraftwerk, R.E.M., and Iron Maiden.

"Dewa" means "god" in Javanese and Sanskrit. *Rolling Stone* said of Dhani and his band, "Armed with big dreams and a name laden with significance, they moved forward, not realizing how enormously their decision to form the band would affect their lives in the years to come."

Dhani and Taylor designed the Indonesian performance campaign-style to motivate people. "This musical campaign has been endorsed by key Muslim theologians, who are joining with pop culture celebrities and other like-minded leaders in the fields of religion, education, entertainment, government, business and media to encourage people of good will of every faith and nation to unite as 'warriors of love,' and to reject all forms of religious hatred and violence," according to LibForAll.

"Warriors of Love," which became #1 on MTV Asia's *Ampuh* hit program in early 2006, was written to promote what Dhani calls "the values of spiritual love, freedom and tolerance," using lyrics inspired by verses from the Quran and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad.

"Hey there, all you lovers of peace," the lyrics call, with a youthful twist that delightfully seizes back the militants' narrative. "Watch out, watch out and be on guard—for lost souls, anger twisting their hearts, for lost souls, poisoned

Photo by Niluh Dipomanggolo

Indonesian superstars Ahmed Dhani and his band Dewa preach a progressive message of tolerance and pure love. The group is leading the pop-culture resistance to Islamic extremism.

Yeh Hum Naheen ("This Is Not Us" or "We Are Not That")

Lyrics by Ali Moeen
Composed by Shuja Haider

Transliteration of original in Urdu and authorized translation into English.

Hamarey Naam Say Phali Howi Jhoti Kahani Ha
This story that is being spread in our names is a lie
Yeah Mohrein Mouat Ki...Mathay Pay Gharoun Ki Nishani Hey
These stamps of death on our forehead are the signs of others
Hamein Jis Naam Say Tum Jantay Ho....Woh Hum Nahien
The name by which you know us—we are not that
Humein Jis Ankh Say Tum Dehktay Ho....Woh Hum Nahien
The eyes with which you look at us—we are not that
Yeah Hum Nahi, Yeah Hum Nahi, Yeah Hum Nahi, Yeah Hum Nahi,
This is not us—this is not us...
Jaisay Sham Atay hi Koi Rasta Bola Bathay
As with the coming of night one loses one's way
Andhairo Say Daaray Itna Kay Hum Ghar Hi Jala Bathay
We are scared of the dark so much that we are burning our own home
Yeah Kya Charo Taraf Urti Howi Ryigani Hey
What is this rising all around us...
Hamarey Naam Say Phali Howi Jhoti Kahani Hey
The stories that are being spread in our names are lies
Yeah Hum Nahi. Yeah Hum Nahi, Yeah Hum Nahi. Yeah Hum Nahi,
This is not us...
Gira Bathay Ha Rastay Mein Sabak Hum Sath Rahnay Ka
We have lost on the way the lesson of living together
Humay Ek Dosray Say Isliya Bhi Lag Raha Ha Daar
We are now even scared of each other.
Who Koi Aur Hain Jin Kay Taray Hataoo May Chehray Hain
They are others whose faces are on your hands
Tumhara Duokh Sumandar Hey....Hamaray Zakham Ghairay Hey
Your hurts are a deep sea—our wounds are deep
Hamarey Naam Say Phali Howi Jhoti Kahani Hey
The stories that are being spread in our names are lies
Yeah Hum Nahi. Yeah Hum Nahi, Yeah Hum Nahi. Yeah Hum Nahi,
This is not us...

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by ignorance and hate. . . . Warriors of Love, teach the mystical science of love, for only love is the eternal truth and the shining path for all God's children everywhere in the world."

Not surprisingly, Islamic extremists have condemned Dhani, a devout Sufi Muslim, as an "infidel" and "Zionist agent." Militants took the musician to court on allegations of defaming Islam, and, according to LibForAll, "sought to ban his use of rock music to promote a spiritual and progressive interpretation of Islam that threatens the appeal of their own Wahhabi-inspired extremism."

Militants threatened Dhani's family, forcing the performer's wife and children to flee their home. They also threatened to burn music stores carrying his albums. Their attempts not only failed, but prompted a public backlash against their cause.

"Competent Public Diplomacy"

"Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the 'right' Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology. Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world. Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the dark-

"Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the 'right' Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology..."

—Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid

ness from which it emerged," Wahid wrote in an essay for the *Wall Street Journal* last year.

The newspaper's powerful editorial page has been a strong supporter of the Indonesian project. "LibForAll is itself a model of what a competent public diplomacy effort in the Muslim world should look like," says the *Wall Street Journal's* Bret Stephens in a profile of Taylor. The American businessman "has engaged influential and genuinely reform-minded Muslims—as opposed to the faux 'moderates' on whom [President George W.] Bush lavished praise

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at the Islamic Center [in Washington]—to articulate and defend a progressive and tolerant version of Islam."

The foundation has accomplished far more than any U.S. government-sponsored action in the war of ideas. "In its brief life, LibForAll has helped turn back an attempted Islamic takeover of the country's second-largest Muslim social organization (with 30 million members), translated anti-Wahhabist books into Indonesian, sponsored a recent multidenominational conference to denounce Holocaust denial, brought Mr. Dhani to Colorado to speak to U.S. military brass and launched a well-researched 'extremist expose' in order," the *Wall Street Journal* says of Taylor, "to get Indonesian society to consciously acknowledge that there is an infiltration occurring of radical ideology, financed by Arab petrodollars, that is intent on destroying Indonesian Islam."

Even though Undersecretary Hughes met with Dhani, heaped praise on him and proclaimed, "people like you are exactly what we need," the State Department failed to provide the multiplier effect the artist could have used to magnify his freedom message. Taylor told the *Wall Street Journal*, "She then asked us whether [Dhani] would be willing to work with the State Department, whether he'd be willing to travel and whether there was anything she could do for him," says Taylor. "We answered all three questions affirmatively. Since then there's been a vast silence."

A New Internationalism

In contrast to the State Department's indifference, Pakistanis and others worldwide have caught on and say they want more. "I have been inundated with messages of support and congratulations from young Pakistanis around the world who have thanked me for standing up and giving voice to their sentiments," says Waseem Mahmood. "The response from the international music industry has been equally humbling—major stars, many of whom I have idolized myself, have contacted me to say how much they loved the song and video and would like to collaborate with us on an English version. I guess that we must have done something right!"

Serviam spoke with Taylor in Indonesia just hours after the December 27, 2007, assassination of Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto. Taylor had heard of "Yeh Hum Naheen," but his foundation had had no contact with the Pakistani performers or producers. When told of the planned versions in Arabic and English, Taylor suggested a performance in Indonesian.

LibForAll and the Yeh Hum Naheen group had long had plans independently to internationalize their musical movement across language and culture. Now Pakistani and Indonesian artists work together with the goal of starting a worldwide Muslim popular cultural movement for religious tolerance and against Islamic extremism. ■

The LibForAll Foundation seeks out partners in the developing world and supports the activities of those committed to civil, economic and religious liberty. "We believe that the rule of law, an honest and competent judiciary/public administration, free trade, freedom of conscience, free speech, the right to peaceably assemble, the sanctity of contracts and universal education are key to civil and economic development, and to the creation of just, prosperous and tolerant society," the foundation says in its credo statement.

The foundation's strategy is based on an "indirect approach" designed to reduce religious extremism and terror by rendering them socially unacceptable, and repugnant, to people and cultures throughout the world.

LibForAll's patron and senior advisor in Indonesia is His Excellency Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia's first democratically-elected president and the longtime head of the world's largest Muslim organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama, with nearly 40 million members.

For more information, contact: LibForAll Foundation, 3524 Yadkinville Road, No. 357, Winston-Salem, NC 27106 USA. info@libforall.org. or visit www.libforall.org.

See the Videos

For more about "Yeh Hum Naheen" and the new foundation created to push the message forward, visit www.yehhumnaheen.org. To view the video with English subtitles on YouTube, visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilsvsm9xgrg.

The LibForAll Foundation's home page is www.libforall.org. The home page for Ahmad Dhani's Dewa band is www.dewa19.com. To view a video of the "Laskar Cinta" single, visit YouTube at http://youtube.com/watch?v=igNSD90lYPo.

"A Muslim Solution to Terror" www.libforall.org/video-LF-PSA-rmvb-wmv.html.