

LOCAL MUSLIMS LOBBY FOR RELEASE OF DONATIONS

Group say charity work is no different than from others

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The Islamic Association of West Virginia is asking the state's U.S. senators to ask the president to unfreeze the assets of three charities the administration has identified as working with terrorist groups.

Dirar Ahmad, president of the association, said the administration has presented no credible evidence that Holy Land Foundation, Global Relief Foundation and Benevolence International Foundation are actively supporting Hamas' military wing or other terrorist groups.

"The main accusation against Holy Land Foundation is that they support families of suicide bombers," he said.

While those families do receive help, it's no different than other charities going into war-torn areas and providing relief, he said.

"We don't go ask the widows and orphans how their dads died, do we? No one does," Ahmad said.

In addition to helping the needy in the West Bank and Gaza, Holy Land Foundation was one of the first groups to establish a fund for Sept. 11 victims and sent aid to victims of the Oklahoma federal building bombing.

The group has also helped natural disaster victims in places as diverse as Dallas, Texas, and Turkey, he said.

Mark Ferrell, West Virginia spokesman for Sen. Jay Rockefeller, said the senator's staff hasn't seen the letter yet and couldn't comment on it. There was no answer at any of the phone numbers for Sen. Robert C. Byrd's offices.

Ahmad's letter to the president includes a petition signed by 286 Charleston area residents.

When President George Bush announced the administration was freezing the assets of Holy Land Foundation, the White House released a fact sheet saying the foundation had made direct fund transfers to offices in the West Bank and Gaza that are affiliated with Hamas as well as to charity committees that are part of Hamas.

Ahmad said the administration apparently doesn't understand that Hamas is a large organization with military and social wings.

"While we disagree with the military organization, that doesn't mean we need to penalize the other," he said.

In the past, the United Nations has coordinated relief efforts with Hamas social wing, he added.

"I don't think the United Nations would deal with them if they thought Hamas was entirely a terrorist organization," he said.

The White House referred terrorist funding questions to the U.S. Treasury Department. A Treasury Department official couldn't be reached for comment Friday.

Ahmad admitted that some people argue that even by supporting the social wing of Hamas the groups are helping support or legitimize the military wing's terrorist actions.

"That's not necessarily true. Somebody can argue that, but is the alternative to deny thousands of children, thousands of needy people the millions of dollars they're dying for?" he said.