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## Technology spreads Muslim anger

Terence Hunt  
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KARACHI, Pakistan -- In markets and tea shops, the news bulletin flashed from transistor radios in Arabic and Urdu, Dari and Pashto. In universities and business offices, it raced across the Internet. In mosques and religious schools, it was repeated from pulpits and loudspeakers.

The report last week that US military interrogators had desecrated the Koran has been retracted by Newsweek magazine after five days of violent protests in Afghanistan that left 15 dead, peaceful protests in other Muslim countries, and horrified reactions from governments across the Middle East. But the controversy has highlighted the extreme sensitivity of religious symbols, especially the Koran, to Muslims at a time when some feel their faith is under attack by the West and their fervor is easily susceptible to manipulation.

The torrent of anger over the Newsweek report was exploited by some religious and political groups, speeded by improved communications in the Muslim world, and mingled with other sources of resentment against the United States. Rapidly improving technology played a role in spreading the allegation of Koran abuse to places it would not previously have penetrated -- even as recently as two years ago when similar accounts were first reported from the US military detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Mosques and Islamic groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan are no longer cloistered from the world. Some have websites, their leaders have satellite phones, and governments have urged them to use computers to modernize their teachings. In Kabul, the Afghan capital, there are now a dozen Internet cafes; one was the target of a suicide bomber May 7.

The anger unleashed by the story appears unlikely to subside quickly, said analysts and leaders in several countries.

"The damage cannot be controlled by the belated retraction from Newsweek under US government pressure," Qazi Hussain Ahmad, leader of the major Islamic party alliance in Pakistan, said by telephone from Islamabad.

Ahmad said his alliance, the Muttahida Majlis Amal, was planning nationwide protests May 27 and that it had "coordinated with Islamic organizations all over the world to join us in this day of condemnation."

Although reaction in Pakistan was relatively tame, the report that US interrogators at Guantanamo flushed a copy of the Koran down a toilet has dominated political discourse. Parliament passed a resolution calling on the United States to punish those behind the alleged abuse. General Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president and a key US ally, urged the United States to "carry out a thorough investigation."

"Koranic desecration is an emotional and combustible issue," said Rifaat Hussain, a scholar of security studies in Islamabad. "In the current polarized climate . . . with the Abu Ghraib incidents and the mindset that the Bush administration is capable of doing anything, it is easy for anti-US forces to join hands with extremists to whip up a popular frenzy."

In Afghanistan, where the reaction was the most severe, religious and political activists said crowds were easily goaded to violence because of other festering grudges, including complaints of prisoners being abused and civilians killed in US military actions since late 2001. In four days of protests, at least 15 people died in clashes with police. "People are full of resentment, and this was their chance to show it," Hafiz Mansour, a conservative Muslim intellectual, said by telephone from Kabul.