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## Bin Laden message: 'I'm still here.'

**In new audiotape, the Al Qaeda leader both threatens the US and offers a kind of truce.**

By Howard LaFranchi and [Faye Bowers](#)

**WASHINGTON** - A new audiotape of Osama bin Laden is designed to counter Western intelligence speculation that the Al Qaeda leader has been cornered or killed, terrorism experts say - and to raise jitters that America's most wanted is still planning terrorist attacks.

"It proves two things," says Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA's Bin Laden unit. "He's not dead. And despite all the things we say about him being isolated and alone, he can clearly dominate the international media when he wants to."

As in the past, the Islamist radical is also believed to be sending a message as much to the Muslim world as to the United States.

In a brief audiotape aired Thursday on Arab television station Al Jazeera, the speaker scoffs at claims that US antiterrorism measures are the reason no more attacks have hit the US since Sept. 11, 2001. Instead, the speaker says, further attacks are in preparation and "you will see them in your houses as soon as they are complete, God willing."

In a new twist, the speaker refers to rising US public opinion against the war in Iraq and says, "We have no objection to responding to this with a long-term truce." In an April 2004 tape, bin Laden offered Europe a truce - a move some analysts saw at the time as an effort to exploit a divide among Western allies over Iraq and antiterrorist measures.

In the same way, bin Laden might be trying to take advantage of what he sees as divisions in the US - although some analysts caution against reading more into the latest tape than a basic desire to reaffirm that the terrorist leader is alive and well.

"He's saying that whatever measures we've taken, they have not affected him," says Judith Yaphe, a former CIA Middle East analyst now at the National Defense University in Washington. "He's got to reassure people that he's alive and well."

Experts in South Asia, where bin Laden is assumed to remain in hiding, agree.

"There has been this long discussion in the media - is Osama bin Laden alive, is he dead, why hasn't he spoken, et cetera? So this is probably a reaction to that," says Ahmed Rashid, author of "The Taliban" and a longtime observer of jihadist groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Of course, if the voice on the tape does turn out to be confirmed as bin Laden's, it does not necessarily prove that bin Laden is unaffected by US and other counterterrorism measures aimed at him and other Al Qaeda operatives.

"It's extremely easy for him to get a message out like this," says Mr. Scheuer, the former US intelligence analyst. "It can be delivered from anywhere in the world" but still appear as though he is doing just fine. On a tape, he adds, "a pup tent can be made to look like a palace."

Still, the tape holds particular messages - both to the US, in the form of an offered "truce," and to the Muslim world, Scheuer says.

The truce offer is not unlike the overture bin Laden made to Europeans in April 2004, he says.

"[The] Madrid [bombings] came first [in March 2004], then he offered the truce, and then there were the London bombings," Scheuer says. "So I think we have to take him at his word here."

But then there is his message to Muslims. One goal is probably to reconfirm bin Laden's standing among Muslims as a leader.

"This says, 'I am the equal of George Bush,' " Ms. Yaphe notes, in the sense of a global player able to make a decision with global impact.

Other experts agree, noting that whatever Al Qaeda leaders may be trying to communicate to the US, they - like all wartime leaders - first and foremost are speaking to the homefront.

"Their real message is meant for consumption by their followers and potential recruits," says Brian Jenkins, a terror expert at the Rand Corp. in Santa Monica, Calif. "It says, No. 1, Osama bin Laden is still in charge. By his communications, by him saying he has been busy preparing operations ... his offer of a truce - all of these are an assertion of leadership."

Beyond that, Mr. Jenkins adds, "It says he is in operational control," something that has been widely debated among analysts. "What [Bin Laden] is saying here is not only is he the leader, but that he also runs operations."

Scheuer says the truce offer "is perfectly consonant with Islamic history. Muslim leaders from the Prophet to Saladin were ready to make a temporary [truce] with the infidels if they thought it would benefit Muslims." The point, he adds, is that "this will resonate very loudly in the Islamic world."

In the tape, the speaker refers specifically to a truce to allow a rebuilding in Iraq and Afghanistan. "What they would love, of course, is if we would just back out of Afghanistan and Iraq," Scheuer says, in part to allow the reestablishment of the Islamic caliphate to begin there.

"For the caliphate to be built, they have to have a political state from which to start," he says. "That's why Al Qaeda valued the Taliban so much. Now they view Iraq in the way they viewed Afghanistan."

With the new tape surfacing on the heels of this week's CIA-directed attack on suspected Al Qaeda strongholds in Pakistani tribal areas, some observers speculate the tape may be an effort to establish Al Qaeda's operability after the attack. But Mr. Rashid says that is unlikely.

"I don't see how he could have reacted so quickly to the recent Predator attack," he says, referring to the

unmanned craft that was used to carry out the bombing.

In any case, Rashid says information about the effects of the raid is so confused that it is looking less like a counterterrorist triumph even without bin Laden's input.

"The problem is that the story in the media, as told by the Pakistani government, keeps changing so many times" he says. "The latest story is that they killed the son of [Ayman] Zawahiri [the Al Qaeda No. 2 leader], but in the villages they say it was all local people."

In the future, he adds, "this could damage America's ability to say in the end, 'We got him.' "

• *Staff writer Scott Baldauf in New Delhi contributed to this report.*

### **A chronology of statements attributed to bin Laden**

Arab television station Al Jazeera aired a new audio tape Thursday said to be from Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. The last message from him was in December 2004.

Following is a chronology of major statements attributed to Mr. Bin Laden or his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri in the past year or so. The statements were aired on Al Jazeera, via audio or video tapes, unless otherwise noted.

**Dec. 27, 2004:** Bin Laden urges Iraqis to boycott January's elections, saying anyone who takes part is an "infidel." He praises attacks in Iraq by ally Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

### **2005**

**Feb. 10:** Mr. Zawahiri says Iraqi elections held under foreign occupation are a sham.

**Feb 20:** Zawahiri says governments cannot stop Al Qaeda attacks, and the security of the West depends on respect for Islam and an end to aggression against Muslims.

**June 17:** Zawahiri says reform and the expulsion of "invaders" from Muslim states cannot happen peacefully. Reform must be based on Islamic law, and Muslim states should be free to govern themselves without interference or the presence of foreign troops, he says.

**Aug. 4:** Zawahiri warns Britons of more attacks. He also tells Britain and the US they will not have peace until they pull their troops out of Iraq and other Muslim nations.

**Sept. 19:** Zawahiri says Al Qaeda carried out the July 7 transit bombings in London to strike at "British arrogance." He denounces Britain for "the historical crime of setting up Israel and the continuing crimes in Afghanistan and Iraq."

**Oct 23:** Zawahiri urges Muslims to help Pakistan's earthquake victims though its government is a US "agent." He denounces Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf.

**Dec 24:** Zawahiri praises the Taliban in an audio tape aired by Al Arabiya television, saying the Islamic movement still controls large parts of Afghanistan.

### **2006**

**Jan. 6:** Zawahri says President Bush's plans to withdraw troops from Iraq meant Washington had been defeated by the Muslims.

**Jan. 19:** Bin Laden warns that Al Qaeda is preparing new attacks inside the US, but says the group is open to a conditional truce with Americans.

- Reuters

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