

## US takes the war option

*UNSC should still make its feeling known*

UNITED States and its allies, namely Britain and Spain seem hell-bent on dropping bombs in Iraq, whether Saddam Hussein relents to their demands or not. They have even gone to the extent of debunking the United Nations realising that they were in the minority at the UN Security Council. How convenient it was for them to drop diplomacy and withdraw the proposed second resolution on use of force from the UNSC when it dawned upon them that it would be voted out by majority members. Even after days and weeks of intense pressure on most UNSC members, they drew a blank. Does it not simply mean that the bigger force lies with the saner section of the world. And, by dismissing the *de facto* majority view out of hand the rationale behind the UN system has been diluted.

What sounds patently scheming, arrogant and diabolic is the manner in which the US and its allies prepared for the war behind the facade of taking a UN role. They let the war juggernaut roll for many months, massing up more than quarter of a million forces in the Gulf in preparation for a war. But when all efforts to win support for a military action failed, they quickly resorted to steps already planned well in advance. Funnily enough, they even tried to put the blame on those countries, without naming them, for the course of action they were about to take. Otherwise, how would one explain Britain's Ambassador to UN, Sir Greenstock's comments that they decided to stop diplomacy because 'one country in particular' meaning France 'would veto any resolution authorising use of force against Iraq'?

We are also witnessing a very dangerous trend in the world order. The issue of national security is being used to justify the cause for an attack; which without any doubt has set a very bad precedent. The perception of right or wrong is also getting blighted. It seems that if a majority of the UNSC members do not toe the super power line then the Council must be wrong. Here we think the UN should have a say in putting the matter in perspective. It was rather disappointing to see that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan did not make any comment on the impending war or the way his organisation has been sidelined.

## Are we prepared to meet its fallout?

*Let's try to cushion effects as far as practicable*

AS the world braces for a war in the Gulf, the question is: how prepared are we to minimise its impact on Bangladeshi Diaspora, and above all, on our national economy?

There are quite a few areas where some immediate steps must be taken to meet any emergency that may arise with a war breaking out in the Gulf. We have to safely evacuate the Bangladeshis living in Iraq and other countries in the region. The diplomatic personnel are back; the rest need to be moved to safety. With 50 Bangladeshis in Iraq, the task looks manageable. But it will take a lot more effort to ensure the safety of the huge number of Bangladeshis living in places dangerously close to Iraq. It is reassuring to learn though, that Saudi Arabia may help us evacuate some in this respect. We must be in touch with the relevant UN and international NGO organisations.

Then there will be the problem of rehabilitating the Bangladeshis returning home. The government should carefully assess the situation -- though it is too early to say what actually will be the magnitude of the problem -- and chalk out a rehabilitation plan for the returnees.

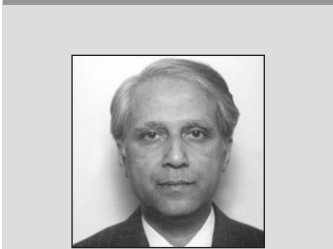
Next comes the question of how the prices of oil will behave. Though the OPEC chief has said that there will be no oil crisis, perception of past events leads us to a different conclusion. It should be noted here that the oil price hike was much greater in 1991 than what it was in 1967, 1974 or 1979. So, a possible oil crunch should figure in our calculations.

The government is reported to have negotiated with Singapore for obtaining silo facilities to store oil bought or being procured from some friendly countries. Such measures are certainly needed to face any critical situation during and after the war.

The government also need to take stock of the food reserves. It must also work in close cooperation with the business community as our exports will be among the early casualties of the war. There are several other economic setbacks that will have to be countered. For example, reduced export trade will adversely affect our balance of payment situation, and remittances from Bangladeshis living abroad may also drop appreciably.

Finally, the government would be well-advised to have a check-list on the areas of concern and make sure that there is no gap in the arrangements.

# Political turmoil, Islam and the West



MUHAMMAD ZAMIR

RELIGION has once again become a force to be reckoned with. Religion is no longer a marginal and private activity. It is a factor that is wielding its own influence on world events. Our significantly small world has revealed our inescapable connection with one another.

Only a few weeks have passed since two million Muslims assembled peacefully in Makkah to perform the ancient rituals of Hajj and to pray together. An ancient prescription was observed with due solemnity. This most important even took place against the backdrop of a possible war in that region. Contrary to the anxiety of many pundits, 'well versed' in the ways of Islam and the concept of 'sacrifice', there was no evidence of anger and terrorism either inside Saudi Arabia or in European countries.

Reflected on the alarm that had swept certain western countries and reports of possible terrorist attacks on their institutions during that period. Fortunately for Muslims, the image of Islam was not battered again and the spiritual aspects of the world 'sacrifice' were not tainted. Unfortunately however, it reflected once more the deteriorating status of Muslims all over the world and also the growing misconceptions about Islam in the West.

In these critical times, I feel that there is grave need for us to try and identify steps that need to be undertaken by Muslims as well people of other faiths to facilitate a more cooperative and positive approach in the understanding of Islam.

Currently, the following factors appear to characterize the prevailing psyche of the western mind towards Islam:

that Muslims in general undertake terrorist attacks, participate in rebellion against established state machinery and are extremists in their opinions;

that Islamic values, culture and civilization are rigid, inflexible and border on being reactionary in a liberal world;

that Islamic culture is incompatible with Western or European values which are inherently uni-

versal in nature and

- that issues of democracy, freedom, human rights and the status of women are alien to Islam and contrary to its spirit and principles.

Some of the criticism deserve serious consideration by Muslims but most of the other unfavourable comments appear to be based on uninformed approaches and superficial attitude towards Islam. They seem to have been prompted more out of premeditated political motives and economic interests rather than civilization and culture.

Islam is universal religion and

cise of such rights.

The stigma of 'fundamentalism' is being ascribed only to Muslims in isolation. That is unjust. In this context, I refer to the interesting view of Karen Armstrong in her biography of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). She points out "that 'fundamentalism' has surfaced in most religions and seems to be a worldwide response to the peculiar strain of late-twentieth-century life. Radical Hindus have taken to the streets to defend the caste system and to oppose the Muslims of India; Jewish fundamentalists have made illegal settlements on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and have vowed to drive all Rabs

their own agenda. Suicides by young and old are encouraged by them as a means of armed struggle, forgetting the principle that neither suicide nor killing of innocent civilians are condoned by the faith. Indiscriminate killing of civilians by Islamic groups in Algeria in recent times have affected the image of Muslims worldwide. This has resulted in cultural plurality becoming the first victim in France and goodwill taking the back seat.

These are singularly difficult times but could be worse in the near future. Saner sections amongst us have to take that extra first step. Discussion is knowledge in the making. We need that now,

in this regard if Islamic countries took effective measures to arrange workshops between professionals, influential journalists, diplomats, academics, representatives of law enforcement agencies, clerics and legislators of different faiths. Such colloquy could identify areas of mistrust objectively. Such meetings could also suggest means for resolving the problems. All discussions within this framework could be carried out on the basis of proven facts, statistics, reason and strictly without emotion and sentiment. Such a dialogue could even be held through the internet.

Muslim authorities, instead of just participating in a blame game,

## POST BREAKFAST

**In recent times, a dangerous concept is sometimes being put forward. Confrontation and conflict is being assumed as inevitable between a resurgent, inflexible, fundamentalist, 'terrorist prone' Islam and others who believe in modernism. In this context, the struggle of people striving to regain their inalienable rights, to determine their own future, is being termed as rebellion, violence and terrorism.**

there is nothing aggressively oriental or anti-Western about it. Any in-depth examination of Islam and its tenets as contained in the Quran and the Hadith will put at rest these criticisms. Islam, instead of being inflexible, accepts other past revealed religions, and takes mankind one step nearer to his Creator. Islam is a direct religion. It is a simple religion. A Muslim does not require an image, symbolic or metaphorical to establish the identity of his Creator. In Islam all are equal. Democracy has been practised in this religion since the death of the Prophet (pbuh). The selection process of the first Caliph was an example of that. In it human rights are assured for all. Women for the first time through Islam were assured a legal status with regard to inheritance. This modern religion repeatedly emphasizes learning and self-sacrifice for the good of others.

Nevertheless, in recent times, a dangerous concept is sometimes being put forward. Confrontation and conflict is being assumed as inevitable between a resurgent, inflexible, fundamentalist, 'terrorist prone' Islam and others who believe in modernism. In this context, the struggle of people striving to regain their inalienable rights, to determine their own future, is being termed as rebellion, violence and terrorism. This is done without taking cognisance of historical facts, and in denial of the principles of freedom and self-determination which are a natural right for people as stipulated in international conventions and treaties. I take this opportunity to mention this because Bangladesh came into being through the exer-

from their Holy Land; Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and the new Christian Right, which saw the Soviet Union as the evil empire, achieved astonishing power in the United States during the 1980s. It is wrong, therefore, it assume that Muslim extremists are typical of their faith. It would be just as mistaken... to dismiss the rich and complex tradition of Judaism because of the immoral policies of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane." She goes on the add that "to put Islam into an unholy category of its own or to assume that its influence has been wholly or even predominantly negative is inaccurate."

Similarly, most regrettably, the concept of Jihad in Islam is also at times being misrepresented and referred to as being synonymous with violence, coercion and compulsion. Jihad in Islam does not mean any of these things. It consists of striving with one's possessions and oneself in confronting injustice. It is a means of assisting the service of public good in all its forms. Believers in born-again Christianity should particularly understand that religious revival mistakenly represented as 'jihad' may be characterised by greater conservatism, but that does not mean that is a regressive step and against reform. Misunderstanding of this factor has quite often led to prejudice and intolerance against Islamic communities. Such communication gaps have been reflected at times in subtle forms of cultural, religious and racial discriminations based on doubtful standards.

Unfortunately, like in other faiths, there also exists in Islam extremists who are committed to

particularly as war looms in the horizon.

In the past two years while problems have multiplied, efforts have been made to create a dialogue. Sadly, this has been limited. This has principally been done through the active interest of some leaders and academicians in the West. They have targeted such inter-action mostly with countries from the Middle East and around the Mediterranean. This has probably been done on the mistaken assumption that if a dialogue can be initiated with the Arabic speaking Muslims the 'terrorism' can be controlled preemptively. It is being forgotten that nearly seventy-three percent of the Muslims are non-Arabic speaking and resident in developing countries in Asia. This large population is also comparatively economically disadvantaged and hence more susceptible to unwelcome overtures from certain interested quarters. I believe that the current approach of focussing only around the Mediterranean is not the best.

However, one cannot just blame western countries. What about Asian states? What have we done? Except for Malaysia, there has been little effort on the part of other Asian Muslim states to engage in an international debate and dialogue on this subject. Are we really that resource starved? Do we always have to rely on western funding to explain our position?

It is this scenario and the growing polarisation in attitude that prompts one to suggest some steps that might remove growing misunderstanding and consequent finger-pointing. It might be useful

should also try to present in easily understandable form, for the common man from the West, the true Islamic concepts of peace, tolerance, coexistence and brotherhood. This attempt should take into account the various opinions arising out of different intellectual, cognitive and cultural standards. It would also be useful in this context to present some of the common elements of faith that exist between Islam and other religions as practised in the Western world.

The Organisation of the Islamic Conference can also play an important role in this regard. The Organisation should encourage incorporation of the study of Islamic culture in the educational curricula of western institutions, in countries, which today have a large number of migrant Muslims as permanent residents.

Similarly, those expatriate Muslims who are living in a non-Muslim environment, should also be encouraged to understand the ethical aspects of other religions, so that they can co-exist better with the host population. This might require the provision of additional resources (but that should be found), for publishing more Islamic books in English, German, Russian, Spanish, Italian and French. Web pages should also be created in all major languages so that people can access to such sources for explanations (not technical or overly narrow in religious connotation) on controversial issues pertaining to Islam.

This aspect is assuming special importance because tens of thousands of Muslim students are travelling to the West for higher

education and are quite often faced with questions from their fellow students who want to clarify points regarding Islam. CDs could also be prepared containing not only information but also visual materials which can expand the horizon of knowledge about Islam and about its rich cultural heritage. Islamic countries have a lot to do with the image of Islam and that needs to be done now.

Muslims living abroad in non-Islamic as well as in Islamic environment should also take some time to interact with members of the non-Islamic community, particularly at the family level. They should not confine themselves only within their own ethnic religious groups. Common elements could then be highlighted and misunderstandings removed. We must not forget that suspicion and insufficient knowledge are the breeding grounds for intolerance, unfairness and bigotry. This in turn creates chauvinism and narrow-mindedness. Muslim communities living abroad instead of staying away should also try to share the joy of people of other faiths when they celebrate their own religious festivals. This will then encourage the non-Muslim host community to seek to understand the blessings associated with Islamic rituals. They will then be less suspicious. We must not forget that (although principles of any religion are ethical and moral in nature) religious festivals include many cultural elements that can help break down barriers and promote goodwill and understanding between communities.

Today as Muslims, we could do with some soul-searching and try to understand why we are being painted in darker shades. We must ask ourselves whether it is possible to have an internal debate as to how to foster closer cooperation amongst ourselves in the first place and then with others.

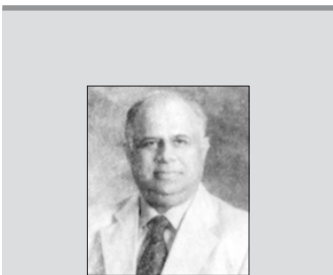
We must understand that killing innocent Muslims, women, children and children in the name of politics --, will not win friends for our causes. We must desist from throwing acid to permanently disfigure a person and restrain ourselves from issuing discriminatory fatwas. These actions harm the Muslim profile.

We have to learn to listen to the concerns and arguments of the other side. Such action will enable us to occupy a higher moral ground and show others that Islam believes in peace, tolerance and in the upholding of the rights of others.

The international media might be controlled by non-Islamic interests, but in these troubled times, it is in our power to build a better image in the West not only of Islam but also of us as Muslims.

Muhammad Zamir is a former Secretary and Ambassador.

# Education without borders



IKRAM SEHGAL  
writes from Karachi

FOR sheer innovation in ideas in a wide range of disciplines varying from business to pleasure, Pakistan has a lot to learn from the UAE; this country is certainly the "new frontier". One can never cease to be surprised by something new in the Emirates every other day. Strategic planners in education should look at the model of the recent international 3-day student conference "e-education Without Borders 2003" (EWB 2003) organised by the Higher Colleges of Education (HCT) in Abu Dhabi. The brainchild of HE Nahayan Mabarak Al Nahayan, the UAE Minister for Higher Education, this extraordinary idea was crafted into shape by the brilliant Vice-Chancellor of HCT, Dr Tayyab Kamali. Being personally closely associated with Shaikh Nahayan for over five years in a professional capacity in a financial entity, one now takes it to be the norm that this outstanding leader always combines his experience and knowledge with an inherent instinct to achieve what others would consider amazing. With a profound vision for the future, His Highness gave the ebullient Dr Kamali the necessary space and freedom to design EWB 2003 not only to be a portal for global initiatives in implementation of technology in education and lifelong learning to be explored but also a platform for discussions and creation of

focus group for dialogue that would create a unique education environment in the global community.

HCT has also launched an "e-education Without Borders World Forum" to create "knowledge clusters" of world leaders in the education community. The conference was an instant success; leaders from different domains debated broader strategic issues and trends at the crossroads of education, science and technology, arts and humanities to sharpen intellectual skills and secure the dissemination

encouraging the worldwide connection of students and faculty (2) connecting international e-education research and (3) facilitating e-education communication connections across borders.

About 650 students attended the student conference, 350 coming from 63 countries other than the UAE. Pakistan had a large contingent of 28 students, many of whom won prizes for their presentations. It was said that the senior delegates from Pakistan, Ms Zubaida Jalal, Pakistan's Education Minister

of knowledge. The Forum's primary purpose is to build an enduring network of education and business leaders who have a common interest in (1) continuing and expanding the success of the "e-education Without Borders" student conference and (2) providing leadership for international entrepreneurial education and experience. The defined objectives are, viz (1) international networks of business and educational leaders, (2) website and non-line journal publishing select papers (3) worldwide mobility of knowledge, (4) international scholarship programme' and (5) creation of new type of international 'school' without borders, for building international business entrepreneurs, not owned or funded by any one institution or country. In addition a 'Knowledge Clusters' panel has been set up to explore key themes, contextually dependant on the other, viz (1)

and Dr Atta ur Rahman, could not make it because official permission could not be accorded in time. They missed the opportunity of experiencing a unique educational and entrepreneurial-mix model in action. However, renowned educationists and IT experts from Pakistan like Salman Ansari, Dr Junaid Zaidi, Dr Mukhtar Ahmad, etc benefitted as invitees from Pakistan. Dr Tayeb Kamali states that "the biggest problem with most corporations today is that they are governed by mediocre ideas". He goes on to state that "meeting the challenge of diffusion effectively depends on developing organisational cultures that continually encourage people to cross "walls and stovepipes" (functional boundaries), not just to tell each other the news, but to inquire and come to greater levels of mutual understanding". He stated that the keys to success in building a tech-

experts in education and enterprise have to say on e-learning and the nexus with technology and entrepreneurship? Dr Paul Elsner equates the American vision for e-learning with 'advances in technology and the fact that the web is always on the move, learning could become an everyday part of our lives. Technology is shifting control of learning from the institution to the individual". In discussing the 'knowledge economy' Alison Wolf, said that, "politicians' faith in education is fuelled by a set of clichés about the nature of the twenty-first-century world: globalize, competitive, experiencing ever faster rates of technical change.... it seems, education is to be a precondition of economic success, and indeed survival". David Blunkett, the then UK Secretary of State for Education and Employment, had suggested lately that, "the powerhouses of the new global economy

are innovation and ideas, creativity, skills and knowledge. These are now the tools for success and prosperity as much as natural resources and physical labour power were in the past century". Dr Quinlan advocated changing the culture of traditional higher education to be more closely aligned with the corporate or for-profit sector, many of the practices of corporate institutions being adopted by public institutions. Dr. van Rensburg believed that participation by university staff in very significant

levels of income-generating activity in no way inhibits or undermines excellence in academic teaching, learning, and research. Dr. Takeda emphasised the importance of effectively involving representatives of business, industry, and government in the development and revision of educational programmes at colleges and universities. Industry can furnish the required technology and valuable advice. For his part Dr. Elsner encouraged a service learning component to educational programmes in which students have an opportunity to apply knowledge they have acquired in the classroom.

Between 1983 and 1996, the US lost 2.3 million jobs that will never return to the US. Yet, during the same period, 5.8 million new jobs were created through entrepreneurial initiatives. These same trends affect the economies of

developed countries worldwide as high-skilled jobs are created to displace low-skilled positions. The synergy of technology, higher education, and business has been a powerful force for revitalising the workforce and the communities where people live. Among the initiatives would be, viz (1) licensing, development and application of new learning technologies is beyond a single nation's resource commitment and financial capability. That is why "e-education Without Borders" creates not only an all-important portal but also an educational partnership that can be utilised for the benefit of the country.

Ikram Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.

### In Memoriam

# Poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah's second death anniversary

RASHED KHAN MENON

IT will be two years since poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah's sad departure on March 19. He died at his own residence in Gulshan. He had passed the last year of his life in a semi-conscious and paralysed state due to his critical health condition.

Poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah was able to find his own place in the hearts of the critics and readers alike from the moment he set

pen to paper and allowed the poetry to flow out from his pilgrim soul. He has made an indelible mark on Bengali poetry by dint of his wholehearted dedication and his sparkling originality. His poetry began with the Language Movement when he began penning the grief and the aspirations of the beleaguered Bengalis. The poem *Kono ek ma-ke* is recited on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February every year. Poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah's poetry blossomed further during and after the Lib-

eration War. In the tumultuous post-liberation years the poet devoted himself completely to poetry. At times melodic and at times epical, his *oeuvre* contains the essence of Bengali culture and history. His poetry, on the one hand, burns with the fiery emotions of the Liberation War, and on the other hand deals with the softer emotions of nostalgia and human bonds. Mother, soil and love -- the themes predominant in his work -- have brought the poet closer to the people's

hearts.

He was an environmental activist and he was well versed in food security and poverty eradication. In spite of being one of the top mandarins in the civil service, he preferred to be known as a poet rather than as a bureaucrat.

Abu Zafar Obaidullah was born on February 8 in Barisal. His father was Justice Abdul Jabbar Khan and his mother was Saleha Khatoon. After completing Bach- elors (Hons) and Masters degrees from the Department of English,

he joined the University of Dhaka as a Lecturer. He was among those leading a procession in '52, defying Section 144. Later he sat for the Pakistan Civil Service examination where he stood second. He joined government service, retiring as a Secretary. As the Secretary for Agriculture and as a technocrat Minister for Agriculture he established the present infrastructure of the agriculture sector. His experience from these appointments presented him with opportunities to work in an



international setting. He served as the Director of the Asia-Pacific

region for FAO. He was also appointed the High Commissioner of Bangladesh to the United States of America.

Poet Abu Zafar Obaidullah obtained a diploma in Public Administration and Development Economics from Cambridge University in England. He was also a member of the governing body of the Winrock Foundation and a Fellow of the Centre for International Affairs at Harvard University.

As a poet, Abu Zafar

Obaidullah was awarded the Ekushey Podok. Among his published works are *Shaat Narir Haar*, *Kokhono Rong Kokhono Shuur*, *Komol-er Chokh*, *Ami Kingdodontri Kotha Bolchi*, *Shohishnu Protikkhai*, *Brishti Ebong Shahoshi Purush-Er Jonno Prarthona*, *Amar Shomaoi Amar Shokol Kotha*, *Khachar Bhit* *Or Chinh Pakhi*, and in English-- *Yellow Sands' Hills*: China through Chinese Eyes, *Rural Development: Problems & Prospects*, *Creative Development*, *Food and Faith*.