

Should we be worried?

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FOR the many Bengalis whose children are heading off to universities abroad this fall, one question is crucial: just how bad is the situation for Muslims in America? The answer isn't reassuring. According to most reports, five years after 9/11 Islamophobia in America remains a wretched reality.

The Council on American Islamic Relations, the largest advocacy organization for Muslims, processed 1,522 reports of civil rights abuses in 2004 -- a 49 percent increase from the year before. In a press release, the Washington-based body said these figures mark "the highest number of Muslim civil rights cases ever reported in our 11 year history."

The states with the worst records are ironically also those with some of the best universities: New York, Arizona, Virginia, Texas, and California were named as the states with the most reported incidents to CAIR.

What worries me more than these reports is the language continuing to be used by people in authority. Recently, President George W. Bush described the war against terror as a "war against Islamic fascism," a term that drew a sharp retort from the president of the largest Muslim group in North America.

"I'm convinced that it is not only inaccurate, but unhelpful. If our major concern is security, security of this country, this is a term that has very bad resonance in the Muslim majority world and makes us feel uncomfortable here," said Ingrid Mattson, the newly elected president of the Islamic Society of North America.

Mattson's concerns are worthwhile for in recent years, Muslims across the country have found themselves battling incendiary language. At a panel held at the University of California in March, Rev. Jesse Lee Peterson, founder of the conservative Brotherhood Organization of a New Destiny, described Islam as an "evil religion," and said that all Muslims hate America.

In September, at a high school in Maryland a teacher allegedly lost her temper after she overheard students utter an Islamic greeting of peace. Charging documents allege the teacher shouted: "Islam doesn't mean peace, it means killing everyone for peace," and "Because of you, our families died in New York!" If it isn't school teachers, it's religious leaders. On the fifth anniversary of 9/11, a church in Florida displayed a sign most Muslims considered to be insulting. "Muslims can convert to Christianity here" read the sign posted in front of the Congregational Church on Laurel Road.

The invitation angered many and prompted Ahmed Badier, director of the Tampa chapter for CAIR, to say: "If church leaders are really interested in saving people, they would find much less offensive ways to do it. Religious leaders are adding fuel to the fire. It's a shame."

In 2003, Badier opposed a Jacksonville minister who had posted a sign stating that the Prophet Muhammad advocated violence.

Despite a mushrooming of inter-faith activities around the country, it seems Islamophobia has only worsened in the last few years.

In 2001, while lower Manhattan was smothered in smoke, President Bush and a sprinkling of congressmen visited mosques to promise Muslims that they were safe in America. Five years later, some elected officials are joining the anti-Muslim lobby to garner support from their constituents. Earlier this month, Redding Mayor Ken Murray was reported as saying Shiite Muslims believe they "are duty-bound by religious law to lie, cheat, steal, kill all who do not worship their version of Allah."

"Folks, they're not like us," he told those who attended a vigil on the fifth anniversary of 9/11.

The mayor later apologized for his remarks.

What have American Muslims done when confronted with such ignorance and hatred? Many have stayed silent, shunning media interviews and contact with non-Muslims. Every time I walk down Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn with my reporter's notebook, doors are constantly slammed in my face.

Others have turned into activists, leaving high-paying jobs to join organizations like the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the American League of Muslims, and the American Muslims for Global Peace and Justice.

A few have picked up arms like the Muslim who burst into a Seattle synagogue in July, shooting all in sight. After declaring, "I'm a Muslim American; I'm angry at Israel," he pulled the trigger, killing one and wounding five.

And I've adopted the Muslim beat, in the hope that churning out stories about the six million Muslims who have made America their home will make a difference.

The writer is a NYC-based journalist currently working on a book about Islam in America to be published by Beacon Press in 2008.

Phulbari and the people's verdict

It was around 4.30pm. There were about a hundred people on both sides of the bridge, they were curious to see what was happening there. Nothing happened there to rationalize firing on the people. We have reason to suspect that the firing by BDR was deliberate, the "authority" had prior plans to kill people to create terror in the area. They probably thought we would break the barricade and would not be able to control the gathering, so firing on us would be justified. However, since we did not break the barricade and did not create any violence despite provocation, the plan was going to be spoiled, and therefore on our return they hurriedly went into action. About 20 people were hit by bullets, 5 persons were killed and several hundreds were injured.



people's reaction to ensure their own safeguards.

The people of Phulbari are not so foolish that they will dance to the tune of "anti-development," "anti-state conspirators," and "talkers" like us. Actually, it was they who initiated the struggle as a reaction to the moves of AEC, and they eventually contacted us when they were looking for a national body that was working to preserve national interest and peoples lives.

It was the National Committee to Protect Oil, Gas, Mineral Resources, Power and Port that had been working hard on scrutinizing deals on natural resources since 1998, and raising their voices against bad deals.

On the people's invitation, we first visited Phulbari in mid-2005, and after witnessing their fear we investigated AEC's documents. Studying AEC's own documents, we discovered the intensity of danger for the people in the region and to the country's economy. In October 2005, we had a meeting with experts and had intensive discussions on our working paper: "Phulbari Coal Project: Whose Fain Whose Losses." That was the beginning of our part. By then, AEC had submitted the EIA (but before submitting that they were given environmental clearance).

Discussion and debates continued. As the days passed, we became more and more certain about the disastrous nature of the project. We embarked on a road march from March 23 to take the facts to the people of other regions as well. On March 25, there was a big gathering of about 20,000 to 25,000 Bangali and Saontal women and men in Phulbari.

In "Phulbari Declaration" of that road march we stated categorically that:

"Bangladesh does have the need for coal, need for fuel, need for electricity, need for development and these are presented by the plunderers as arguments justifying the project. We want to clearly emphasize that these are precisely the same reasons why we are making the demand for scrapping the project. The project is intended

to transfer ownership of the valuable coal and other mineral resources from the hands of Bangladesh people to the plunderer, an inexperienced and impostor company named Asia Energy.

"If the project is implemented the coalmine will become AEC's property, a small portion (proposal was one-third) of extracted coal, to be purchased at an exorbitant price, will be offered to Bangladesh. Besides, the open pit mining method will result in destruction of a prosperous area comprising of the thanas of Phulbari, Parbatipur, Birampur, and Nawabganj, the cessation of all agricultural and other economic activities, extinction of schools, colleges, hospitals, places of worship and loss of archaeological treasures, including eviction of lakhs of people, and desertification of a vast area of about 600 sq km. And pollution of rivers, canals and wetlands in the vicinity. Those who attempt to portray this project of destruction and plunder as 'development,' and propagate the view that foreign investments are essential ingredients of 'development,' are committing a crime.

"On the one hand the life of people in Phulbari and surrounding thanas would be ruined, while on the other, AEC would gain a huge sum through plunder. Those who are prepared to indulge in such vicious profit making through siphoning of non-renewable resources, born 270-280 million years, are the enemy of the people. At the different meetings and contacts held during the three-day march, a demand has been raised for putting the people's enemies to trial. This august assembly declares that we shall never let our lives and property be sacrificed at the altar of racketeers' profit schemes. We shall not let local and foreign plunderers plunder our precious coal resources.

The people of Bangladesh, and particularly the people of Dinajpur, are ever vigilant guardians of their resources. We pronounce the following demands, from this mammoth gathering of Phulbari, to the government of Bangladesh:

- All secret agreements with AEC shall be scrapped.
- The ministers and bureaucrats responsible for this give-away contract must be penalized through forfeiture of property, and be subject to exemplary punishment.
- The recently promulgated coal policy aimed at facilitating plunder and appropriation by AEC and Tata shall be annulled and a new energy policy shall be prepared for maximum utilization of oil-gas-coal resources by building a skilled human resource and institutional base.

This meeting demands immediate expulsion of Asia Energy from Phulbari or else the people would be forced to take stern steps including 'gherao' unless the demands raised in this meeting are fulfilled immediately.

Therefore, we, together with the inhabitants of the area, informed the company and the government about the people's opinion much earlier. Nevertheless, neither the government nor the company showed any respect to the people's will. They proceeded with the plan to create havoc. While the government was saying that no final contract had been signed, the AEC was expanding their fieldwork, trying to bribe people in many ways and therefore made people suspicious and terrified. In that perspective, the gherao program of August 26 was declared with the hope that both the parties would take necessary steps to cancel the project before the deadline. They did not.

On August 26, 60,000 to 70,000 people were marching in Phulbari to say NO to AEC's big open pit mining (OPM) project. People wanted to give a strong message to AEC that they were unwanted in the region, and also in the country. They were clear in expressing their verdict that no OPM would be allowed in the area. People were angry, nevertheless disciplined. They were gathered under the banner of the National Committee.

Police and BDR created a barricade in front of Choto Jamuna River Bridge about a kilometer from the Asia Energy office. Before reaching

ended peacefully. We came down from the temporary stage and with the local leaders walked down to the other side of the barricade. Only 200 yards from there a group of people wanted to hear more about the program. I was explaining, and suddenly, at that moment, we heard sound of gunfire from the bridge. BDR did that.

It was around 4.30pm. There were about a hundred people on both sides of the bridge, they were curious to see what was happening there. Nothing happened there to rationalize firing on the people. We have reason to suspect that the firing by BDR was deliberate, the "authority" had prior plans to kill people to create terror in the area.

They probably thought we would break the barricade and would not be able to control the gathering, so firing on us would be justified. However, since we did not break the barricade and did not create any violence despite provocation, the plan was going to be spoiled, and therefore on our return they hurriedly went into action. About 20 people were hit by bullets, 5 persons were killed and several hundreds were injured.

Killing did not stop people from saying NO, rather protests spread countrywide. Women, young and old, came out from their weak shelters to face aggressive BDR. We found the streets full of agitating people, a majority of whom were women. From day two, people from adjacent thanas started coming in thousands to express their solidarity. After four days, being unable to stop the spreading anger, the government was compelled to sign an agreement with the National Committee, where they made commitment for not allowing open pit mining any time anywhere in the country. The government also declared that it would take necessary actions to cancel Phulbari coal project and to say good-bye to AEC. It was a victory for the people; it was a victory for the country.

The people who are embedded with companies like AEC used to see and enjoy the power of plunder. But we witnessed people's power, power of the powerless, and power of collectivity. Embedded persons may see this as disaster since, for them, corporate interest must be put above everything else, no matter what happens to people or the country. For them, whatever FDI corporates do to maximize profits that must be the best for people, there is no other alternative.

Experiences of many countries of Africa and South America, rich in resources but ugly in poverty and repression, is irrelevant to them. They consider people's cry against genocidal projects as "politics" and harmful for "economics." But facts and figures, the science, clearly show that natural resources in Bangladesh, like in many other countries, have turned into a liability, and a source of danger for the people, not due to lack of FDI but because of it.

A vicious local-global alliance has been working on plundering in the name of FDI.

People are not always passive and fatalist like this alliance wants them to be. People of Phulbari, by sacrificing their lives, have halted the process of making PMDs in Bangladesh. That is their best gift to the country. They have written the people's verdict in blood: people will not accept any FDI that goes against the interest of the people; second, people will not honour any contracts secretly signed by the commission agents, keeping people in the dark and against their will; and third, natural resources are common good, this cannot be privatized for corporate profit, but must be used for the people's need.

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Is resignation obsolete?

NAYEEM JAFAR

RESIGNATION over a cause one considers to be right, or simply to protect one's own image, is a notion we are wilfully unfamiliar with. Our politicians, judges, and bureaucrats differ on assorted issues more often than not, and yet their commonality against any suggestion to resign from their positions is amazing.

A brazen example is our chief whip in parliament. Print media featured reports about his kitchen being run at huge public expense. Lo and behold, instead of feeling culpable, we saw him set out to justify the wrong and sue the newspapers for sully his image, if at all he has an image worth mentioning. He also brushed aside negative reviews when his son, a connoisseur of exhortation, was arrested on suspected carjacking charge.

True to the nomenclature of his position, he whips the whole nation when he defends his son or his right to feed all and sundry at public expense. Are we then not to conclude that the word resignation is something obsolete to him and his ilk?

Interestingly, offspring of chief whips seem to share a knack for media headlines: one of the colourful sons of the immediate past chief whip was also reportedly arrested in 2003 by the Rapid Action Battalion.

Then we have a High Court judge who had run into controversy over his degree certificate. Any sensible person simply would have released academic records to disprove discrepancies he or she is accused of. But the judge prefers otherwise, and we marvel at his immense capacity to remain unperturbed against disparaging insinuations.

Like the chief whip, he is perhaps also under the illusion that the court would miss his profound legal scholarship if he happens to choose the civilized way of calling it quits. But now that his judgeship is confirmed, there is a good chance that some day he would be elevated to the Appellate Division as he continues to weather adversaries. He might even end up becoming the chief justice!

The latest addition in the list is our chief election commissioner, unfortunately again a Supreme Court judge. In early January, the High Court directed the Election Commission to revise the existing electoral roll, rather than prepare a fresh one. Instead of compliance, the Election Commission filed a writ petition with the Appellate Division.

But in May, the chief election commissioner's brethren on the bench rejected the arguments of the institution he heads, and retained the High Court ruling. He truly cuts a sorry figure. And now that the US-based National Democratic Institute following a field visit has observed that there is a danger that "public confidence in the chief election commissioner will continue to deteriorate to the point that he should not continue his duties" does he regret for not moving out earlier to salvage whatever public standing he has had as a judge?

Barring a few poor souls, our high-ups perhaps believe that it is their religious duty to cling onto power, as if their absence will hasten catastrophe. Do we hear them say "apres moi, le deluge" ala Louis XV? Sworn to protect the constitution, highest-ranking judges opted not to confront unconstitutional takeovers and instead protect their own seats.

We can rightly doubt if there would be among them a Saizuzzaman Siddiqi, the former chief justice of Pakistan, who along with five of his colleagues, refused to swear allegiance to the regime of Parvez Musharraf (and therefore ceased to hold office).

Are our ministers aware that one of their counterparts in the Indian state of Orissa resigned sometime in April, taking moral responsibility for the illicit liquor deaths of a few tribal people? We have our examples of General Osman and Barrister Moinal Hossain resigning from parliament when one-party system of government was introduced in 1975. But they appear not to be inspiring anymore.

This then leads us to wonder, why? Cynical as it may sound, but it is perhaps true that with the decadence of social values, our people in position have successfully learnt the art of "adaptability." Over years, skin has thickened too much for folks to be troubled with humiliation. No wonder, resignation because of personality conflict, or difference of opinion over a worthy cause, is on the fast-track to oblivion in Bangladesh.

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