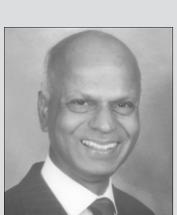


Modern Spain and the Muslims

CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

In my last letter, published in the Daily Star of May 1, 2001, I wrote about the landing of first Muslim soldiers in the peninsula in the year 710 A.D. I also outlined how in a mere matter of twenty odd years, the Muslims conquered the Iberian peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal), south western region of France (reaching close to Paris), how due to internal strife retreated from France and northern Spain and how in 1492 lost their remaining political and military power. I also briefly described the process through which Islam was banned and the remaining Muslims were forcibly converted to Catholicism. Later they (the baptised Muslims) were massacred and expelled from the peninsula in 1609 and 1611. The language and belief system were actively generated and propagated by the Church to demonise Islam and the Muslims. Thus to the ordinary Spanish mind, they (the Muslims) came to be considered irredeemably as "the other".

The questions that can be raised at this stage are: What is the situation now? Are there any Muslims in Spain, today? If so, what is the attitude of the Spaniards towards them? How do they perceive the Muslims today? Are there still any vestiges of the great Hispano-Muslim civilisation in Spain?

Today there are no legal bars to practise Islam. Article 16 of the Spanish constitution guarantees ideological and religious freedom to all Spanish citizens and foreigners living in Spain. Nearly four hundred years after the tragic events of 1609 and 1611, the Muslims have started coming back, -- this time, not as conquerors but as immigrant workers (often as illegal immigrants). In spite of an ageing population, the Spanish economy is booming. Spanish women are no longer content with their traditional role of being affectionate mothers and caring spouses. They are joining the labour market in droves. As a result from being a country with one of the highest birth rates in the world, today Spain enjoys (if that is the

right expression) one of the lowest. Actually according to some estimates, following the pattern in other EU countries, in future, Spain's active population, instead of increasing will gradually fall. To keep its economy moving and its sophisticated social security system functioning, it needs hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers every year.

According to reliable estimates, today, there are over 400,000 Muslims in Spain (including Ceuta and Melilla),— many of them illegal immigrants. They first try to enter Ceuta, which lies just across the Moroccan border on the northernmost tip of the African continent. From there they try to cross the Gibraltar straits, often with the help of the local mafia. In their quest for a better life, every week, hundreds of illegal Muslim immigrants, from Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India try to enter the peninsula. In the process many of them drown in the turbulent waters of the straits (the motorised rafts they ride often capsize). The survivors, when caught are deported within twenty four hours of their landing. (Spain acts as the guardian of the EU's western frontier against immigrants from the South). Those who manage to dodge the police, work in the "black economy" as temporary agricultural or construction labourers, because many native-born Spaniards prefer living on the dole to undertaking these menial tasks. They live in inhuman conditions in squalid shanty towns around the big cities or in caves and plastic tents in Almeria (where they are not allowed to rent rooms in town and yet from time to time the local government authorities destroy their shacks in the countryside on the pretext of being illegal or unhygienic). Thus we have a paradoxical situation -- even though the Spanish economy needs them, many ordinary Spaniards, some of their political leaders, and often the local governments reject them because of their deep-rooted fear of losing the so called Christian way of life. However, this is true that many Spanish intellectuals and surprisingly even some Catholic church leaders (Cardinal Rouco Varela among them) realise that these medieval concepts of closed tribal societies are not in line with the much-proclaimed principles of an open democratic state. They, through various NGOs, are giving financial and moral support to the illegal immigrants. In spite of all this, unfortunately racism and xenophobia are on the rise against these recently-arrived Muslim immigrants, who happen to be very poor.

In modern Spain, people are not hostile to the Muslims as such, although most of them harbour a self-complacent sense of superiority vis-a-vis the Muslims, which, I am afraid is a common characteristic of their smug Euro-centric culture. A Muslim's social position and economic status are important factors which influence a Spaniard's perception of him. The higher his economic standing is, the greater are his chances of being accepted by his Spanish neighbours on an individual basis. There is consider-

Spaniards may envy their wealth and social position but usually do not object to their presence on the Spanish soil.

As far as the vestiges of the great Hispano-Muslim civilisation are concerned, most ordinary citizens are not aware of them. The few who have a vague idea of the Moorish presence in Spain think of it as something negative. For them it is so remote and so abstract that it is almost unreal. In any case, the term itself (los Moros) has a derogatory connotation. To the ordinary Span-

nomic reasons (as explained above), the number of Muslim immigrants to the peninsula will inevitably increase, despite the Immigration Commissioner's unhelpful attitude towards non-Catholic immigration. It is not a simple task. After all, for so many centuries (even during the days of Franco) the Spaniards have been taught deliberately and purposefully to look at human differences in a straightforward oppositional manner. This simplistic binary thinking was and I am afraid, still is exhibitions (partially financed by the regional and local governments of Madrid) on more or less the same subject, i.e. Islam and Spain—one in Madrid and the other in Alcala. (By the way, both of these cities were founded by the Muslims and still carry Arabic names). Curated with an admirable mixture of learning and care by La Fundacion de Cultura Islamica (a wholly Spanish organisation), "Islam: A part of our own heritage" is a fascinating exhibition, which is divided into eight sections. It tries to explain the

those who practise it."

The exhibition gives historical facts, quotes texts and cites figures to refute the common prejudices and misconceptions in the West against Islam like, for example, that the Muslims are by nature dirty or women have always had an inferior legal status in Muslim societies or the Muslims are intolerant to other religions etc.

In dozens of artistically designed posters, the exhibition organisers describe the vestiges of Hispano-Muslim civilisation which are still present in Spain. First of all, despite all efforts to purge the European culture of Arab influence, there are still approximately eight hundred Arabic words in use in Spanish, French, Portuguese and Catalan. In astronomy, words such as nadir, zenith, almanac, etc. are only a few examples of such denominations. Many stars carry Arabic names. Acrab, Algedi, Aldebaran are a few examples of Arabic influence in this field. Botanical terms such as saffron, lemon, jasmine, coffee, etc. are of Arabic origin. In Chemistry words like alcohol, alkali, camphor, syrup, alquimia are still used. The Hispano-Muslims were great builders alfombra, Alba-Il, azulejo, etc. are only a few examples of dozens of Arabic words still used in this field. In agriculture and farming, words such as noria, a c e q u i a , a l g o d o have their origin in similar Arabic words. The exhibition organisers also point out that there are many Spanish rivers, mountain ranges and innumerable towns and villages, which still carry Arabic names. (Actually according to some experts one third of current Spanish vocabulary is of Arabic origin).

Then they (the organisers) go on to describe briefly the contribution made by the Hispano-Muslims to architecture, astronomy, astrology, agriculture, botany, biology, mathematics, medicine, philosophical

studies etc. etc. In my opinion, the exhibition has been successful in putting across the message: "it (the Hispano-Muslim civilisation) embodied what came before and illuminated what came after". In other words, no matter whether the modern Spaniards like to acknowledge it or not, the vast legacy of al-Andalus is an important part of their national heritage. Therefore, they cannot reject Islam, nor those who practise it.

Whether the ordinary Spaniard gets this message or not is quite another matter. Whether in his self-complacent mind, that irredeemable "other" (the Muslims as a community) will ever become part of "us" remains yet to be seen because so many centuries of ill-intentioned propaganda and accumulated prejudice cannot be eradicated that easily, even though there is a growing realisation that these Muslim immigrants are badly needed for the well-being of the country. (Although the Spanish government is reticent in giving publicity to the contribution made by the immigrants to the Spanish economy, the British Home Office has just published a report in which it acknowledges the fact that the immigrants Britain, not only increase the gross domestic product significantly every year but also pay 2.6 billion pound sterling more into the government treasury than they take out.) It would be a good idea to carry out similar research in Spain as well. Meanwhile we cannot but admire the organisers of these exhibitions and conferences for their courageous stand on these sensitive issues and wish them a hearty Godspeed.

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Whether the ordinary Spaniard gets the message or not is quite another matter. Whether in his self-complacent mind, that irredeemable "other" (the Muslims as a community) will ever become part of "us" remains yet to be seen because so many centuries of ill-intentioned propaganda and accumulated prejudice cannot be eradicated that easily, even though there is a growing realisation that these Muslim immigrants are badly needed for the well-being of the country.

able tolerance toward a small minority of Muslims, who belong to the urban professional class and who live interspersed with the Spaniards in predominantly Spanish neighbourhoods. The larger the concentration of Muslims in one neighbourhood, the greater are the chances of intolerance and discrimination. I have observed less tolerance and more prejudice against the Muslims in rural areas.

Then, of course, there are the Arab princes from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, who own sumptuous palaces on the Mediterranean coast, luxurious pleasure yachts and hobnob with the Spanish aristocracy. They make generous contributions to charities and local governments and give employment to hosts of gardeners, guards, cooks etc. Needless to say, the

ish mind, the term raises the spectre of illegal Moroccan and other North African immigrants. They readily equate Islam with misery and ignorance. It is hard for them to imagine that the ancestors of these marginalised poor immigrants were the founders of the most advanced European civilisation of its time, i.e. the great Hispano-Muslim civilisation, whose presence can still be found everywhere and in every walk of life in Spain, if only one bothers to look for it or one is made aware of it.

There are, of course, a few scholars and students of Islamic history who take a genuine interest in deconstructing this negative image that has come down to us through the centuries. The government is also interested in creating a better image of the Muslims because it realises that for eco-

at the heart of social perception of race, religion and culture in Europe.

Recently the government and the NGOs have started a subtle campaign to educate the public about Islam and Muslim immigrants. Unfortunately the current conservative government of the country (the central government) does not seem to have a comprehensive policy to deal with the issue (there are only piecemeal measures which are often contradictory). Given the fact that the NGOs have found everywhere and in every walk of life in Spain, if only one bothers to look for it or one is made aware of it.

basic principles of Islam, how the Muslims used to live in al-Andalus and what contributions they made to art, architecture, astronomy, mathematics, medicine etc and why Islam should be considered as an important part of the rich cultural heritage of Spain. According to the organisers, the fundamental objective of the exhibition is to convey a simple message that, "we (people from different parts of the world) may look different but we are all equal. We share the same rights and obligations. We must not allow ourselves to be unduly influenced by misunderstandings and misinformation. Ignorance is at the root of all prejudices. The objective of this exhibition is to bring home to the visitors (meaning the Spaniards) that Islam is part of our own heritage. Therefore, we cannot reject it nor

Excerpts from the 'declassified' main report of Hamoodur Rahman Commission INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS-II

HAVING surveyed the course of our relations with the Great Powers and the other important countries of the world, we feel we are now in a position to attempt an answer to the two questions which have been uppermost in the minds of most of our countrymen in connection with the conduct of our foreign policy:-

(a) Was there an international conspiracy to dismember Pakistan, and was Gen Yahya Khan's regime a party to such a conspiracy; and

(b) Whether, in the event of the answer to the first question being in the negative, the state of our relationships and alliances with the world powers justified the confidence with which Gen Yahya Khan plunged the country into a war of destruction in both East and West Pakistan?

Some political leaders, notably Khan Abdul Wali Khan of the National Awami Party and Sardar Shaukat Hayat Khan of the Council Muslim League, as well as journalists, like Mr Altaf Hassan Qureshi of the Urdu Digest, have expressed the view before us that the fall of Field Marshal Mohammad Ayub Khan, the transfer of power to Gen Yahya Khan and the eventual dismemberment of Pakistan owing to the policies pursued by Gen Yahya Khan, are all a part of an international conspiracy directed by a certain superpower. While such a view may fit in with a subjective, or even a journalistic analysis of the events we are investigating, we are not at all persuaded that as a judicial tribunal we can arrive at any such finding.

The facts and circumstances, as they have emerged from the voluminous evidence examined by us, are

that the basic element in our situation, right from 1947, has been the hostility of Hindu leaders to the very concept of Pakistan. The Indian leaders agreed to Pakistan only when it became clear to them that partition was inevitable as a price for the transfer of power from British to Indian hands. The issues, which have divided India and Pakistan, were certainly capable of resolution in a just and equitable manner, provided the Indian leaders had shown the necessary generosity, breadth of vision and above all, acceptance of Pakistan as an independent state. Having failed to prevent the creation of Pakistan, the Indian leaders set about weakening Pakistan in every conceivable manner, so as to realise their dream of unchallenged Indian supremacy in Asia. In 1965 India planned to inflict a decisive defeat on Pakistan and thus settle once for all the question of Indian supremacy and reduce Pakistan to the position of a satellite.

Indians had always viewed the separation of the two wings of Pakistan as a cherished goal which was attainable under propitious circumstances. A golden opportunity was provided to India by our own internal dissensions and the violent demand for regional autonomy, and later independence, put forward by the Awami League. In this background Pakistan endeavoured to enter into various international arrangements for safeguarding its national integrity and sovereignty. We have seen how our search for a guarantee of our national security first took us to the United Nations, then threw us into the lap of the United States of America, making us join various defence

pacts. Our need happened to coincide with the global policy of the United States regarding containment of communist China. The shift in American policy in 1962, and the United States' decision to arm India in spite of Pakistan's protests, was the direct result of these global requirements, and could not be attributed to any lack of cooperation or correct behaviour on our part.

Our desire to normalize relations with our great neighbours - China and Russia - met with ready response, owing once again to the fact that our requirements were found to be in harmony with the world policies of these powers. However, this state of affairs could not continue indefinitely in view of the differences which were developing between China and Russia, and the possibility of a detente between China and the United States. Our continued friendship with China came to be looked upon with suspicion by the Soviet Union which started leaning heavily towards India so as to counter-balance China in the Asian continent. Soviet assistance to India, culminating in the Indo-Soviet Treaty of 9th August, 1971, would therefore, appear to be essentially part of the global arrangements envisaged by Russia for the security of Asia, and not a step directed towards the undoing of Pakistan.

Being aware of the hostile

designs of India, and taking note of her alignment with a superpower, it was obviously for the Pakistan government to avoid creating or precipitating a situation which would enable India to proceed to embark upon a war of attrition against Pakistan by employing military equipment supplied by the Soviet Union. Once India and Pakistan got involved in a bloody conflict owing to their own inherent animosities, and circumstances created by events in East Pakistan, it is difficult to see how USSR's assistance to India, in terms of the Indo-Soviet Treaty,

could be described as a conspiracy.

It can, of course, be argued that as an ally of India and a superpower, USSR could have used its undeniable influence to dissuade India from interfering in the internal affairs of Pakistan and embarking upon open aggression against a smaller neighbour. Soviet Union's failure or unwillingness to do so appears to us to be attributable to her conviction that the military regime in Pakistan was not amenable to advice in the matter of settling the East Pakistan crisis. We have already seen that even friendly countries like China, the United States, Iran, Turkey and the United Kingdom were all advising President Yahya Khan to arrive at a political settlement with the duly elected representatives of the people of East Pakistan. Instead of doing that, the president persisted in pursuing a course of political action which had no hope of acceptance by the people of that province. Such being the case, the unrest continued to increase in East Pakistan, the refugee problem caused by this unrest continued to magnify, and the events inexorably led to disaster. It is not possible to condone President Yahya Khan's political blunders in East Pakistan, and his failure to appreciate the realities of the international situation, by saying that there was an international conspiracy to undo Pakistan.

As regards the second question, it will be seen that as the situation between India and Pakistan was fast deteriorating and India had entered into a defence pact with the USSR, President Yahya failed to obtain a firm commitment from either China or the US to come to Pakistan's military assistance in the event of aggression by India.

Insofar as the role of the United Nations is concerned, our conclusion is that although this august body failed to prevent the dismemberment of Pakistan owing to the repeated use of the Soviet veto, yet a different result would have ensued

obtain a satisfactory resolution from the Security Council immediately after the Indian invasion of East Pakistan as well. From the detailed analysis of the events in East Pakistan between 10th and 15th December, 1971, it does appear that the military situation was indeed critical, but we have seen that the battle had not yet been joined with the Indians for the defence of Dacca. With proper guidance from GHQ and a wise and courageous lead by the eastern command, it would have been possible to hold out for another two to three days, thus enabling the adoption of one of the resolutions acceptable to India and the Russians. An examination of the text of these last minute resolutions leaves no doubt that a ceasefire in accordance with their terms would have offered us an escape from the surrender and its inevitable consequences.

Next: MILITARY ASPECT

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Before the doctor comes

Bites and stings

Bites from mosquitoes and midges, or stings from wasps and bees can be extremely painful, causing hard red swollen lumps which itch intensely. Use insect repellents to help prevent bites and stings.

What to do:

& if the sting has been left in the skin, remove it with clean tweezers, taking care not to squeeze the poison sac as this will force the remaining poison into the skin;
& apply a cold compress to the bite or sting for quick relief from pain;
& gently massage sting relief cream into the affected area for longer term relief.

Tomorrow: Self-help and other tips.

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by Jim Davis

I'M A CAT WITH DARK GLASSES AND A FAKE ARROW THROUGH HIS HEAD, HOLDING A RUBBER CHICKEN, GENIUS!

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