

War against terrorism or against Islam?

FIROZA HABIB SHAMAAEL

EVERYONE was horrified by the terrorist attack on September 11, a despicable act by a pack of mad men. The whole world condemned this with one voice including us Bangladeshis.

Now many associate this terrorist attack with Islam. One wonders why? This association between evil and Islam, has been a part of history for a very long time. For centuries there has been a conflict between Islam and Christianity. The Christians have seldom respected the religion of the Muslims, this isn't just a baseless theory held by Muslims; it has been proven and again time by the words and actions of many Christians themselves. The most blatant expression of this must be the awful footnotes printed in some translations of the Holy Quran. These footnotes insinuate that Islam has no values, has no base and, worst of all, that Islam is a religion inspired by evil. I first noticed this in George Sale's translation of the Holy Quran. This prompted me to check other translations and sure enough, the footnotes in those too were full of such insinuations. It is not possible to translate something falsely but an author's power also lies in the extra notes, information, glossary, introduction that he includes in his writing.

We learn from Dr. Maurice Bucaille's first-hand experience: "In what contempt the Muslims are held by certain Christian circles! I expected this when I tried to start an exchange of ideas arising from a comparative analysis of biblical and Quranic stories of the same theme. I noted a systematic refusal, even for the purpose of simple reflection, to take any account of what the Quran had to say on the subject in hand. It is as if a quote from the Quran were a reference to the devil (Satan)." ("The Bible, The Quran and Science" translation of La Bible La Coran, et la Science by Dr. Maurice Bucaille)

The Westerners claim that Islam was spread by the sword, that it is based on ignorance and that it preaches intolerance. Priests have mainly been responsible for this concept, which they started spreading hundreds of years ago and continue to do so in today's world. Many non-Muslim great scholars have bravely admitted the misconstrued ideas held by their fellow countrymen: "No other religion in history spread so rapidly as Islam. The West has widely believed that this surge of religion was made possible by the sword. But no modern scholar accepts that idea and the Koran is explicit in support of the freedom of conscience... True, there were often wars between Muslims and either Christians or Jews (sometimes because the older religions insisted on battle)... but testimony is overwhelming that 'followers of the Book' (Jews and Christians) were usually given decent treatment, sanctuary and freedom to worship as they wished." (James A. Michener, "Islam: The Misunderstood Religion" in The Reader's Digest, American edition, May 1955).

"Incidentally these well established facts dispose of the idea, so widely fostered in Christian writings that the Muslims, wherever they went, forced people to accept Islam

at the point of the sword." (Lawrence W. Browne, "The Prospects of Islam," London 1944)

"The Crusades, the Turkish wars and the great expansion of Europe, widened the gulf between Christianity and Islam, while as the East was gradually brought under ecclesiastical influence the contrast grew deeper. The theory, however, that the Muhammadan conquerors and their successors were inspired by a fanatical hatred of Christianity is a fiction invented by Christians." (C.H. Becker, "Christianity and Islam," London, 1909.)

"The Jihad (holy war) was not really obligatory except against people who had no revealed religion or who menaced the existence of Islam... Jihad had to be waged to defend Islam against aggressions. Once the war was terminated, the Muslims always displayed a great tolerance towards the conquered peoples leaving them their legisla-

tion and religious beliefs." (O. Houedes, "La Grande Encyclopaedia," 1894.)

"When the Khalif Omar took Jerusalem, A.D. 637, he rode into the city by the side of the Patriarch Sophronius, conversing with him on its antiquities. At the hour of prayer, he declined to perform his devotions in the Church of the Resurrection, in which he chanced to be, but prayed on the steps of the Church of Constantine; for, said he to the Patriarch, 'Had I done so, the Mussalmans in a future age might have infringed the treaty, under colour of imitating my example.' But in the capture by the Crusaders, the brains of young children were dashed out against the walls; infants were pitched over the battlements; men were roasted at fires; some were ripped up to see if they had swallowed gold; a massacre of nearly 70,000 persons took place; and the Pope's legate was seen partaking in triumph." (John William Draper, "History of the Intellectual Development of Europe.")

"History makes it clear, however, that the legend of fanatical Muslims sweeping through the world and forcing Islam at the point of the sword upon conquered races is one of the most fantastically absurd myths that historians have ever repeated." (De Lacy O'Leary, "Islam at the Crossroads," London 1923)

"In their wars of conquest, however, the Muslims exhibited a degree of toleration which puts many Christian nations to shame." (E. Alexander Powell, "The Struggle for Power in Muslim Asia," New York 1923)

All these differences whipped up by followers yet Muhammad and Jesus preached the same message: Jesus: "Lord our God is one God and He has no partner nor do any share in His honour."

Muhammad: "Lord our God is one

and He has no partner nor do any share in His honour." It was the Christian priests who started associating others with God and brought others (Jesus, Mary) up to the same respect as God, thus bringing the main conflict between Christians and Muslims.

"And someone had described the third century as one of the most unhappy of the beginnings of the controversy about the relation of the Son of God to the Father. The question of the divinity of Christ took first place in theological discussion... but the problem was raised as to how this recognition of Christ as Saviour and worship of Him as Lord could be explained relation to a religion which had asserted at the cost of its own blood a pure monotheism against the polytheism of the Roman World? Eusebius says that during the years of peace which preceded the Diocletian persecution, the Church fell on evil days and showed signs of

degeneracy." (J. Windrow Sweetman, "Islam and Christian Theology," Lutterworth Press, London, 1945)

"No single real reform of morals" says Dr. Dollinger, "is due to the Popes; but to them were due the miseries and failures of the Crusades and the loss of Constantinople to the Eastern Church." Though a sincere Romanist, he confesses that the priests were not only grossly ignorant... but that they were responsible for papal forgeries, and for the violence which condemned whole towns and provinces to slavery. Their faith, he says, was not only Tri-theistic, but also idolatrous. Europe has to thank the subjects of the great Arab Khalifs for preserving the ancient learning and Greek philosophy and for opposing Christian priests, interested only in childish legends and superstitions. They (priests) corrupted all that they touched and whatever truth reached them they converted into 'Fabulous Monstrosities.' This is an extract from "Encyclopaedia of Religions," by J.G.R. Furlong, University Books Vol. 1, page 421 under 'Christianity.'

Millions of people are rejecting Christianity and embracing Islam. This is where the real annoyance (mildly put) is for those who adhered to what the priests had said. This is why they cannot leave their hate of Islam.

When I was in England once a priest told me that it was very easy to live an Islamic life and that was the reason why there was such a high rate of conversion. I explained that a Muslim has to pray five times a day, fast for a whole month and pay 2.5 per cent of his income as obligatory charity. They have to be straightforward because hypocrisy is against Islam. This is why whole Muslim nations remain undeveloped while the West has advanced by climbing

the ladder of hypocrisy. This is what the whole of Western diplomacy is based on; one set of words, a different set of actions; war in the name of justice, dropping both bombs and aid (the same colour), promise to capture terrorist, children ending up in hospital. And now the West says Muslim terrorist but also warns not to associate Islam with terrorism. One can only conclude that ordinary Westerners do not know much about religion, least of all about Islam. Except for a few scholars most Westerners not only entertain misconceptions about Islam, they practically despise it; and for this the priests are to blame. Not only do they take away the sanctity and respect of another religion, they displace it with misconceptions and disgust. This seems to have affected all Westerners ranging from housewives to Generals.

The following have been quoted from an IPS Report, 10/03/92, today." (George Bernard Shaw, "The Genuine Islam," 1936)

"... Our current hypothesis about Muhammad, that he was a Scheming Impostor, a Falsehood Incarnate, that his religion is a mere mass of quackery and fatuity, begins really to be now untenable to anyone. The lies, which well-meaning zeal has heaped around this man, (Muhammad) are disgraceful to ourselves only." (Thomas Carlyle, "The Hero as a Prophet," 1841)

"...none of the great figures of history is so poorly appreciated in the West as Muhammad... if we are to correct the error we have inherited from the past, we must in every particular case hold firmly to the belief in his sincerity until the opposite is conclusively proved." (Montgomery Watt, "Mohammed at Mecca")

"Muhammad... an impostor, as ignorant Christians called the great Arab." (G.W. Leitner, LL.D., Ph.D., D.O.L., "Mohammadianism.")

Because of their hate for Muslims, America is paying the Jewish state of Israel five billion dollars a year. And a well-fattened Israel kills Palestinians with American weapons. It is only natural for, not only Palestinians but also any logical thinking human, to feel hatred and disgust towards those who support Israel. When the Western media interviews Palestinians, their attacking tone is full of hate. The same interviewer questioning an Israeli gets the tone of a parent chastising a disobedient child. The death of an Israeli gets repeated lengthy exposure on television, while ten deaths of Palestinians gets little coverage, no mourning is shown, nor is there any compassion.

During the independence of the Indian subcontinent, Britain divided it according to its religion and thus India and Pakistan were born. However, they left the issue of Muslim populated Kashmir undecided.

America's policy towards Bosnia, during the Yugoslavian war of 1993, was so unfair that there were a few highly publicized resignations at the US State Department. George Kenney, Deputy Chief of the US State Department called the peace parley in London "a charade..."

Whether directly or indirectly, the West is responsible for the sufferings of millions of Muslims all over the world. Millions of Iraqi children are dying because of cruel policies imposed on them by Western leaders.

The West expects Muslims to cry silently; any form of protest is given the label of terrorism. Whenever a Westerner commits terrorism he is not designated by religion, we never here the phrase Christian terrorist. When they are related to extremist faiths then they are called psychopaths and mentally deranged and their actions are blamed on misspent childhoods.

When will the day come when the world will newly define the word "terrorist" and Christians and Muslims will be able to live side by side without hatred?

The Westerners claim that Islam was spread by the sword, that it is based on ignorance and that it preaches intolerance. Priests have mainly been responsible for this concept, which they started spreading hundreds of years ago and continue to do so in today's world. Many non-Muslim great scholars have bravely admitted the misconstrued ideas held by their fellow countrymen.

UN Secretary-General's global call to action against HIV/AIDS

The Secretary-General has set five priorities for action:

- Preventing further spread of the epidemic, especially by giving young people -- those at greatest risk of infection -- the knowledge and power to protect themselves. Large-scale awareness campaigns must be mounted, and access provided to voluntary counselling, testing and, when appropriate, condoms. About a third of the 40 million people living with HIV/AIDS are aged 15-24.
- Reducing HIV transmission from mother to child, which the Secretary-General called "the cruelest, most unjust infections of all". All mothers must be able to find out whether they are HIV-positive, and those who are must have access to short-term anti-retroviral therapy, which has been shown to reduce mother-to-child transmission by up to half. In the year 2001 alone, some 800,000 children under 15 years of age worldwide acquired HIV, the vast majority in this way.
- Ensuring that care and treatment is within reach of all. The Secretary-General noted, based on his recent meetings with leaders of six of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies, that they are now ready to sell lifesaving drugs to developing countries at greatly reduced prices. Some 95 per cent of the world's 36 million HIV-

infected people live in developing countries, and only a fraction of those living in sub-Saharan Africa currently have access to anti-retroviral therapy. Access to affordable HIV-related drugs, however, is only one part of a comprehensive HIV care package, which includes voluntary counselling and testing, home and community-based care, and simple treatments for opportunistic infections.

Delivering scientific breakthroughs. Higher priority must be given in scientific budgets to finding both a cure for HIV/AIDS and, even more importantly, a vaccine against the disease, to save succeeding generations.

Protecting those made most vulnerable by the epidemic, especially orphans. Help must be provided to the estimated 13 million children -- most of them in sub-Saharan Africa -- who have lost their mother or both parents to AIDS. In his Philadelphia speech, the Secretary-General asked the audience to imagine the human faces behind that statistic, noting that it is more than all the children in Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina combined.

HIV/AIDS : A disease of poverty

DR. SYED KAMALUDDIN AHMED

AIDS as an infectious disease has its own consequences. Besides its health consequences as a major contributor to the present and future disease burden, the disease on its own nature of affliction may wallop upon other aspects of socio-economic development of a country. World has already experienced the overwhelming downturn impact of HIV/AIDS epidemic on the development of severely affected countries. It has been becoming clearer that the epidemic intensifies the poverty level in developing especially economically more disadvantaged nations and delays the accomplishment of their development goals. The impact and the disease burden of the epidemic may be measured in terms of personal loss, family consequences, impediments in social development, and over and above, by its effects on national growth and economy. Psychological trauma from getting informed, sometimes inappropriately, of being a HIV infected person, social stigma attached to the identity and limitation of life activity most often restricts the personal growth of an infected person during the period of his or her survival. The emotional loss, loss of income, early orphanhood and its consequences are among the most potential impacts on a family. Premature death at very young age of life pursues the consequences to be seen from a broader perspective. Projection of population growth for 13 countries in Africa in 2010 predicts a total population loss of 30 million in presence of an AIDS epidemic. Given the longer incubation period of the disease, that is the time required between infection and illness and death, the impact of the disease should increase in the years ahead. This large death rate that is true for regions of Asia also, would undoubtedly affect the growth and structure of the population of the countries. The life expectancy and dependency ratio is likely to be adversely affected. This may consequently affect seriously the human development in countries and regions already burdened with multitude of problems and impediments. Recently available information and evidences suggest that life expectancy at birth and more at adult age has significantly declined over the past years in countries of African continent that are affected by HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The possible impact of heightened mortality from HIV infection on fertility is not often taken into consideration in the demographic projection for planning and monitoring purposes in developing countries. But recent review of such an impact in three African countries like Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe showed a close correlation. Therefore, the population projection data available for countries may stand to be unrealistic or an underestimation. Sluggish human growth and retarded replacement of skilled manpower may leave the effect of the epidemic alive for a long time even in the situation where the epidemic is contained.

HIV/AIDS epidemic creates a number of construct vicious cycles that are very much linked to the national growth and development. AIDS is already identified as a disease of poverty. Information on income levels and infection rates across the countries at least suggests so. Human habitations affected seriously by HIV epidemic both in African and Asian continents have multiples of poor population than nonpoor. An internationally

adjusted standard of absolute poverty suggests that in Sub-Saharan Africa poor to nonpoor ratio is 4:1. Therefore, arbitrarily, even if the infection rate is same among the two populations, the number of infected people among the poor cohort should be enormously higher. Taking into consideration the illiteracy, lack of information, limited access to service facilities and other related factors, the vulnerability among poor need not be overemphasized.

If we focus on issues of sexual transmission of the infection, poverty is found to be the main line reason for getting one into the profession of sex work, and a woman who is poor will find it harder to insist that her sex partner abstain from sex with others or use condom or take other steps to protect her from getting infected. If gets infected, her earning sources would be diminished putting her into the rails of poverty cycles. Similarly, cross-country regression analysis data has shown that countries with larger migrating population tend to have larger AIDS epidemic, although migration contributes immensely to economic growth of a country. Poverty is underscored as one of the root causes of cross-country migration. Therefore, when an infected person returns back after being entrenched from his job, poverty burden of the family is rather exceedingly increased.

In a family situation, early parental death and consequent poverty and orphanhood may lead the children to school dropout and labour exploitation. They are ultimately exposed to a situation where abuse, trafficking and forced sex work becomes a norm. Poverty and added powerlessness among girls and young women make them more vulnerable to rape, unwanted pregnancy and other abuse-consequences. Among boys and young men, poverty may increase the high-risk behaviour like unprotected sex and drug abuse. All those may make the young population more vulnerable to HIV infection.

The impacts of AIDS epidemic, specially its economic end results, are more significant at personal and community level rather than national or macroeconomic level. This is more true for poor and marginalized population. A household survey in Thailand revealed that HIV infection in family members caused inadequate consumption in family member; using up of family savings for medical expenditure; selling out of lands, household articles, vehicles and cattleheads; and pulling children out of school and borrowing. Thus there was a big change in socio-economic classification of community population, the poor becoming poorer and middle-class reverting to the bracket of poor. Poorer cohort of population is less educated and have very limited access to information and prevention methods, and only seldom have enough resources for care and treatment of a sick family member.

The direct and indirect cost of treatment and care deserve some mention here. The cost of HIV testing, diagnosis of AIDS-related illnesses, and treating conditions like tuberculosis are to be met from the family exchequer directly. Similarly, cost of public awareness and health information, universal safety precaution, safe blood provisions, AIDS research and surveillance are direct cost to the health system. In countries where the health care is fully or partly subsidized, treatment and care also becomes a direct cost to the health system. Loss of productivity and income, prolonged illness and

death add as indirect cost due to the illness. The overall phenomenon nothing but only accentuates the downgrade of human development index.

If we consider the vulnerability of HIV/AIDS, certain occupational group may be identified as common victims of the epidemic. Occupation related to transportation, both land and riverine, fishing, construction, and persons in uniform are found to be in more exposed situation. Contribution of those occupation groups at both micro- and macro-economic level cannot be easily ignored. A study in India revealed that the loss of productivity due to AIDS in monetary terms was Rs. 1,014 billion for the year 1991. From above information, it may be well anticipated that, as a developing country, Bangladesh with its large population size but very limited resources, will have major development consequences unless timely and appropriate measures are taken to combat the epidemic. Implementation of effective prevention and intervention programmes in such situations calls for feasible, doable and cost-effective strategies. The strategies need support from highest political level and participation of programme planners and managers, communities and individuals. Effective implementation of HIV intervention strategies should include evidence-based planning, allocation of adequate resources, strengthening of national capacities for a sustained response, heightened and expanded community level responses, reducing vulnerability of the poor and the marginalized, creating enabling environment for safe behaviour through implementation of policies, legislation and services, and finally ensuring easy access to HIV/AIDS care and support.

Initiatives to incorporate newly emerging issues like HIV/AIDS prevention in the national planning process as well as in sector-wise development planning is necessary to address the above propositions. Multi-sectoral involvement may be facilitated if careful consideration is made during preparation of Annual Development Plan, Five Years Plan and Perspective Plans. Ministries of Health, Law and Justice, Home Affairs, Social Welfare, Youth, Women Affairs, Religious Affairs, Foreign Affairs, Manpower and Employment all should have a coordinated strategy to address different components of prevention planning after identifying priority issues in individual Ministry's own planning so that HIV/AIDS may be dealt with as a future thrust sector. The immediacy of addressing the HIV/AIDS issue through a well judged and evidence-based multi-sectoral planning may be well understood from what is mentioned in HIV/AIDS Prevention Planning document of India, which says, "If immediate steps are not taken to contain the HIV/AIDS epidemic, India may follow in the footsteps of the some of the most affected countries in Africa, resulting in erosion of many past gain in human development such as life expectancy and infant mortality rate, and the doomsday scenario also includes the collapse of the Indian public healthcare system which is already overburdened".

Dr. Syed Kamaluddin Ahmed is a Behaviour Change Intervention Specialist of National AIDS/STD Programme

'We are not the Taliban' say Mexico's beleaguered Muslims

JOHN ROSS writes from San Cristobal de las Casas, Mexico

INSIDE the dusty compound behind the forbidding, no-nonsense walls of the Sheikh Hamden Bin Rashid Al Makoum Mosque and madrassa (Islamic school), the faithful are summoned to prayer five times a day.

Like good Muslims everywhere these Tzotzil Indians study their Koran, eschew pork, honour Ramadan, and dream of making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

"There is but one God and his name is Allah," announce the writings on the walls of the mosque just outside San Cristobal de las Casas, the throne of the Chiapas highlands. Islam, the world's fastest-growing religion, long ago expanded beyond the Arab world -- only 18 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion Islamic believers are rooted in the Middle East. Muslims proselytize on the five continents today and the deeply spiritual Mayan mountain villages of the impoverished, heavily Indian southern state of Chiapas are no exception.

For the 40-odd Tzotzil Indian families grouped together here, their conversion to Islam has been one more step on a long and complicated religious journey. Most are natives of San Juan Chamula in the saw-toothed mountains above San Cristobal, an idiosyncratic Catholic municipality characterised by a fanatical devotion to its saints.

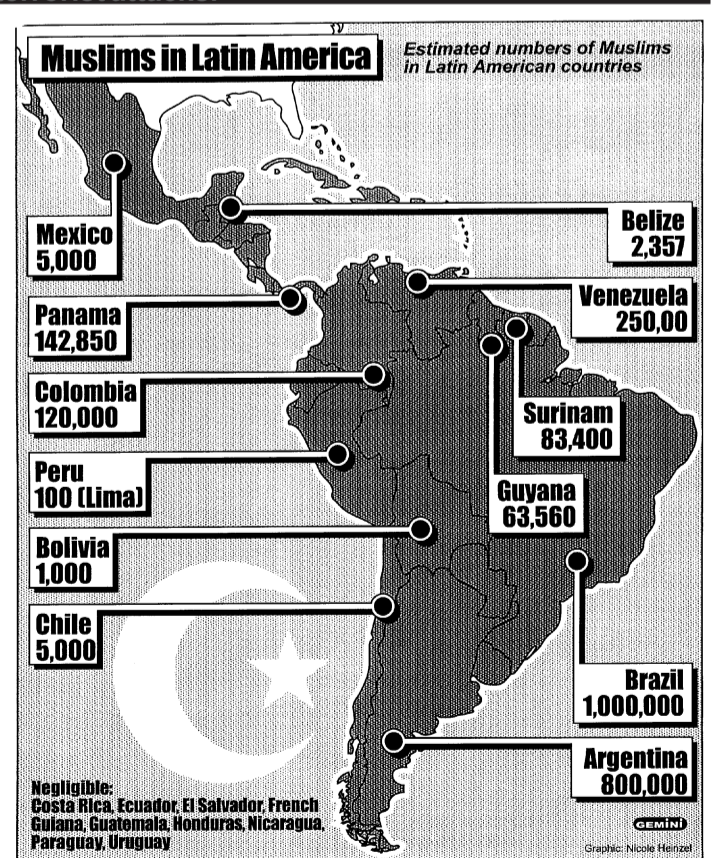
The Sheikh Hamden mosque sits at the foot of the La Hormiga colony at San Cristobal's outskirts, in the midst of a haphazardly arranged religious ghetto that features at least seven evangelical congregations and *templos* like The Strong Fort Pentecostal House of Prayer.

Chiapas is one of the least Catholic states in the Mexican union. Although nationally Catholics claim 90 per cent plus of the general population, in Chiapas only 67 per cent profess allegiance -- 23 per cent list membership in one Protestant schism or another, and 10 per cent call themselves spiritualists, non-believers or members of non-Christian churches.

In recent years, Chamula's most aggressive evangelical leaders have been lay preachers Manuel Collazo and Domingo Lopez Angel, Catholicism dominates Mexico's religious landscape, but in the southern Chiapas state a section of the indigenous population has decided to turn to Islam. A Gemini News Service correspondent visits one of Mexico's few mosques to see how Muslims fare -- and the risks they face in a backlash against Islam from recent terrorist attacks.

A pistol-packing one-time deputy for the left-centre Party of the Democratic Revolution in the Chiapas congress.

Both men were collared during a military raid in La Hormiga in 1998 and thrown into the state's maximum-security prison.



Union, named for a long-dead communist, whose leaders all have taken Muslim names.

Their mosque, founded two years ago, has never been registered with the government's Sub-secretariat of Religions, as required by law.

With rumours flying wildly about the mosque's motives, Lopez and Perez are understandably wary of interviews, screen their phone calls, and are permanently out of town to the press. Several television shows have tainted mosque members as "terrorists".

Lopez is a serious, darkly bearded man who exudes suspicion on the morning he encounters a US reporter reading the messages on

the mosque's walls. Lopez is accompanied by an equally serious companion who clutches a Koran and has come to Chiapas from the Mexico City Islamic Cultural Center to teach a class in the madrassa.

Before they disappear into the compound, the reporter is able to ask a few questions.

What is the Tzotzil connection to Islam?

"The *indigenas* are connected to nature...they see God in their forests and their mountains -- and Islam means 'the natural way'," Lopez says. "Christianity broke this connection to nature but Islam restores it...Islam is the last and most complete message from

God...it is for all people, all races, all men and women..."

What is the role of women in the mosque?

"Our women are modest and keep their heads covered by a shawl -- they are not veiled and we do not force them to wear the *burqa*," Lopez says, referring to the traditional Islamic robe that covers women from head-to-toe.

"We are not the Taliban."

In its two years of operation, the Sheikh Hamden mosque has attracted 500 converts, mostly Indians, but many have fallen away. "There are many pressures," Lopez says, gesturing at the neighbouring Christian churches.

San Cristobal's Muslims have been particularly vigilant since the 11 September terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, and anticipate harassment by authorities and neighbours as the war in Afghanistan intensifies.

Indeed, evangelical leader Manuel Collazo has accused members of the mosque of being supporters of Osama bin Laden, the chief suspect of the attacks, and his al-Qaeda network.

Yet Mexico's 5,000-strong Islamic community is not particularly Arab (half are Mexicans), with the largest congregation -- 400 -- grouped around the Islamic Culture Centre in Mexico City.

One such Mexican convert is Penelope, a middle class international trade student who abandoned the Catholic Church because "it is a hypocritical institution".

"In Islam, I have found where I belong," she tells the *daily Reforma*. Penelope may soon have to find a new place to practice her religion. The Mexico City Islamic Cultural Center has repeatedly had its windows smashed and receives daily death threats through telephone calls in a spasm of bin Laden bashing.

The centre's British-born Imam Omar Walton pleads for tolerance.

"It is not fair to threaten all Muslims because of the actions of one man," he says. "Hitler was a Catholic but we do not condemn all Catholics."

John Ross is a US-born journalist and author.

An overview of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic 2001

An estimated 40 million people are living with HIV. In 2001, about five million people around the world became infected.

- HIV/AIDS is now the leading cause of death in sub-Saharan Africa. Worldwide, it is the fourth-biggest killer. In 2001 alone, AIDS claimed three million lives.
- About one-third of the people currently living with HIV/AIDS are aged 15-24. Most of them do not know they carry the virus. Many millions more know nothing or too little about HIV to protect themselves against it.