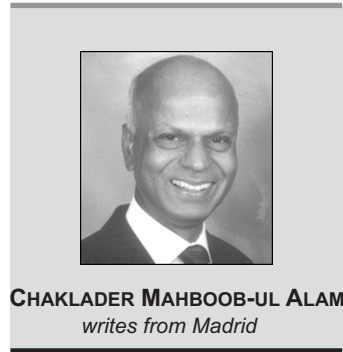


Palestine : An SOS call to the European Union



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

Poor Palestinians! It appears that they are a doomed nation. Men and God seem to have abandoned them. They have no where to go and no one to turn to. Sometimes I cannot help feeling that they are done for. The overall situation in Palestine is worsening minute by minute -- Israeli tanks are entering deep into the so-called Palestinian controlled territories, Israeli F 16 jet fighters are firing missiles on Palestinian targets, their helicopter gun ships are bombarding Yasser Arafat's residential complex, Israeli bulldozers are reducing everything that falls in their way into rubble and the world is watching in disbelief that the West is allowing Ariel Sharon to get away with all this and at the same time preaching the virtues of democracy, human rights and freedom.

I did not think that I shall ever regret the fall of the Soviet Union but today I do -- not because of its human rights record but because of its position as a counterweight to US hegemony. For almost fifty years the two super-power system provided some international security through the Mutually Assured Destruction policy. There was a kind of balance of power on the world political stage and the smaller non-aligned nations could go about their business without much fear. The world today has become unipolar. There has never been so much concentration of power -- economic, military, technological and media -- in so few hands. The non-aligned nations of the world are at the mercy of the whims and caprices of a very powerful oligarchy with an extremely simplistic vision of the world i.e. good vs. evil. According to

their own public pronouncements, you are either with them or against them. There is nothing in between.

A combination of extraordinary factors and the twists and turns of history have placed the United States in a unique position. There is no denying the fact that we are on the threshold of or already deep into a new era -- the American era. How the history will judge the American era will to a large extent depend on how it uses or abuses its unique position as world's sole surviving superpower. I am afraid, at the time of writing this article, the judgement of world's one thousand two hundred million Muslims and many millions of Christians across the globe is not a very favourable one.

The following quotation from a recent article written by Seumas Milne in one of Britain's most prestigious dailies (The Guardian) sums up the frustration of these hundreds of millions of people all over the world: "The support from the Bush administration for Ariel Sharon's latest onslaught on the West Bank and Gaza must surely bring to an end any illusion that, in the wake of Sept. 11, US influence would be brought to bear to achieve a just peace in the Middle East..... Instead of pressure on Israel to end its 34-year-old illegal military occupation, the United States is cheering on its attempt to smash the fragile institutions of the Palestinian Authority. Instead of using its unparalleled leverage to help bring about new negotiations, the United States has lined up behind Mr. Sharon, the man of blood responsible for the deaths of hundreds of civilians in the past year, and still facing war crimes investigations over his role in the Sabra and Chatila massacre of 1982".

The unhappy conclusion is that instead of being a fair team leader of world's close to two hundred nations, the US is acting in a completely biased fashion (perhaps all previous empires have behaved in the same manner) sustaining and endorsing the inhuman actions of its vassals. The sad truth is that the Americans have so far done nothing to prove that they can act as honest brokers in the Middle East conflict. What is even worse is that they do not seem to care. The Mus-

lim nations of Asia, Africa and Europe lack the capacity to exert any pressure as a political or economic bloc. Besides, the Muslim world is too fragmented to have any real power. The only nations that have some clout and economic power are the members of the European Union. They are already helping the Palestinians in more ways than one and they are grateful for that help. But they can do more and the Palestinians have a right to demand more from the Europeans. Why?

I hope, the Europeans will forgive me if I go back in history to find

the Western media about Islam being an intolerant religion.) I shall merely cover the latter part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. It was during this period that International Zionism was conceived, the Jewish holocaust took place, a collective feeling of guilt took root in the European conscience and the Balfour declaration was proclaimed (which eventually created the state of Israel). All this took place in Europe and the principal protagonists were Europeans. Therefore, in my opinion, Europe bears a special moral responsibility to help

was established in Switzerland. The infamous Dreyfus case in France merely strengthened his resolve for the establishment of a separate homeland for the Jews. To this end he continued negotiations off and on with Turkey and Britain (the dominant colonial power at that time) until his death in 1904 without much success.

The beginning of the first World War (now Turkey was an enemy) and the scientific contribution made by a British Jew of Russian origin called Chaim Weizmann (the first president of Israel) to the British war effort made a considerable impact

World War , the San Remo conference of the Allied Powers (1920), confirmed the Balfour Declaration and gave the Palestine Mandate to Britain. It is worth mentioning here that at that time Palestine was not an empty place. In other words, Britain, a major European power and its allies made promises to give away a country without really taking into consideration the inherent rights of the people who were already living there and whose ancestors had lived there for centuries -- the Palestinians were sacrificed to soothe their own guilty conscience. Arab opposition to the

lem over to the United Nations. Thus, with the crucial support from the United States, on May 14, 1948, the state of Israel came into existence. The rest of the story covering Arab incompetence, Jewish military supremacy, massacres and mass expulsion of the Palestinians from their own land is well known to everybody.

Now, what can Europe do to remedy the situation at least partially? First of all, we must accept the fact, the current Israeli policy is wholly dependent on unconditional economic, military and diplomatic support from the United States. No one harbours any illusion that Europe will militarily help the besieged Palestinians against the wishes of the United States. But if it wants to prove that it has an independent conscience and a separate identity it can seriously threaten Israel with economic sanctions and if need be impose sanctions on them. Israeli economy is already suffering from the after-effects of the Intifada (which by the way, is not an uprising in the ordinary sense of the term but the last desperate call for help from a besieged people who have been systematically robbed of everything including human dignity and ignored by the international community).

European economic sanctions will certainly send a powerful message to the Israelis. It can also impose travel restrictions on the Israelis, cut off diplomatic ties with them and thus internationally ostracise them. Generally speaking, the leaders of the United States have no sense of history. In personal conversations with the Americans, time and again I have been surprised to find that they do not know that the Palestinians are the victims, -- not the aggressors or terrorists as it has become fashionable to describe them. (If they are terrorists, what about the American patriots who fought the British in the American War of Independence or the French *maquis* who fought Hitler's armies in occupied France or the Spanish guerrillas who fought the invading armies of Napoleon etc? I can give a dozen more examples of this nature.) The European Union, under the chairmanship of Spain for the next six months, can exert influence on the United States

and persuade its leaders at least to listen to the Palestinian side of the story. The Europeans are in a position to tell the Americans that all the atrocities that are being perpetrated daily on the Palestinians in the name of Israeli "democracy" can not be morally justified. A modern democracy does not advocate far less impose an apartheid system, does not militarily occupy the remaining land (only about 23% of original Palestine) of a dispossessed people, does not institutionalise murder and state terrorism, does not practise torture and targeted assassinations, does not brand stone-throwing young children (who protest against a thirty-four year occupation) as terrorists and shoot them down like dogs, does not subject men, women and children of a neighbouring people to daily humiliations in a hundred different ways etc.

Europe can convince the Americans that Ariel Sharon does not really want peace unless it is obtained on his terms, which effectively means the complete subjugation of the Palestinian people as a slave community. Palestine is not the Wild West and the Israelis do not have a "manifest destiny". Unless the Israelis and the Americans are thinking of mass deportation of all the Palestinians or ethnic cleansing by murder on a massive scale (like Hitler's "final solution of the Jewish problem"), the only way Israel can obtain security is to dismantle all its settlements in the occupied territories and accept the creation of a truly independent and viable Palestinian state (not Bantustans).

LETTER FROM EUROPE

Europe can convince the Americans that Ariel Sharon does not really want peace unless it is obtained on his terms, which effectively means the complete subjugation of the Palestinian people as a slave community. Palestine is not the Wild West and the Israelis do not have a "manifest destiny". Unless the Israelis and the Americans are thinking of mass deportation of all the Palestinians or ethnic cleansing by murder on a massive scale (like Hitler's "final solution of the Jewish problem"), the only way Israel can obtain security is to dismantle all its settlements in the occupied territories and accept the creation of a truly independent and viable Palestinian state (not Bantustans).

arguments in support of my thesis. Leaving aside the destruction of Jerusalem by Roman legions in the year 70 A. D., which effectively swelled the number of Jews in the Diaspora (many of whom were forcibly brought to Europe by Rome), it was Europe's deep-rooted anti-Semitism which was the principal cause for the rise of Zionism as an international movement and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel on Palestinian land. I do not intend to go back to the wholesale massacre and subsequent expulsion of the entire Jewish population from Spain in the fifteenth century by the Christians. (By the way, the survivors found refuge in the Muslim countries around the Mediterranean, where they lived and prospered until the creation of Israel). I shall not even talk of the subsequent inquiries that took the lives of so many Jews and converts all over Europe. (I am a bit tired of reading and hearing so much ill-intentioned propaganda in

the negotiations. The British government felt so indebted to the Jewish community in general and to Chaim Weizmann in particular that through Balfour Declaration (November, 1917) it declared its acceptance of the Zionist proposal to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine. (Surely, the British and other Western powers could have shown their gratitude and appreciation to the Jewish community by giving away an empty chunk of territory twice the size of Israel, in Canada, Australia or elsewhere for their homeland. By the way, these vast swaths of territories -- in some cases entire continents --, which even today remain sparsely populated, were conquered by European colonial powers during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.) Of course, the Jews did not know at that time that the British had made other conflicting commitments to the Arabs, the French and the Russians (Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916). However, after the end of the first

project delayed the process for a number of years. Then came the rise of Nazism in Germany and the second World War. Approximately six million Jews from all over Europe perished in the holocaust, which hastened the pace of the creation of Israel. Never in human history had a crime of such cruelty been committed in pursuance of a deliberate government policy. Coming in the wake of already existing anti-Semitism in most countries of Europe, the magnitude of the horror enhanced the sense of guilt in European conscience. In order to soothe this guilty conscience, the European leaders together with the US decided to implement the Balfour project by establishing a permanent haven in Palestine for Jewish survivors of the holocaust. Finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile their conflicting commitments to the Jews and the Arabs, the British decided to abandon its mandate over Palestine and to turn the prob-

lem over to the United Nations. Thus, with the crucial support from the United States, on May 14, 1948, the state of Israel came into existence. The rest of the story covering Arab incompetence, Jewish military supremacy, massacres and mass expulsion of the Palestinians from their own land is well known to everybody.

Soviet collapse triggers selective memory

LAURA-JULIE PERREAULT
writes from Moscow

The monument is unmissable. Standing along the snow-covered road from Moscow's Sheremetevo Airport, it is ringed by hundreds of yellow and red flags.

It commemorates a defensive fence that was erected around Moscow in the winter of 1941, in the midst of World War II.

"60th anniversary of the Moscow battle, 1941-2001", says a sign. "Moscow, city of heroes", boasts another.

The banners, accompanied by Soviet posters featuring Red Army soldiers and praising a strategic victory of that army against Nazi invaders in what the Russians call the "Great Patriotic War", stretch on for kilometres.

All the way to downtown Moscow -- to the heart of the city: the legendary Kremlin.

A string of ceremonies and musical performances have been held since 5 December, the day the Moscow battle started 60 years ago, and will continue beyond 7 January, the day of the final victory.

But amid the nostalgic clamour for Moscow's glory days, one anniversary remains unmarked, though not forgotten: the day the Soviet Union collapsed 10 years ago.

There is not a single sign in the city to remind visitors (or Muscovites) that in the course of 17 momentous days from 8-25 December 1991 the Soviet Union dissolved itself, putting an end to a socialist dream born 74 years earlier.

The only reminders are a few newspaper headlines reporting on a meeting that took place on 30 November in Moscow, bringing together leaders of the 12 ex-Soviet republics to talk about the first decade of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which succeeded the Soviet Union.

It is a decade since Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, stepped down. Few in Moscow have forgotten those stormy days in December 1991 -- few want to remember them.

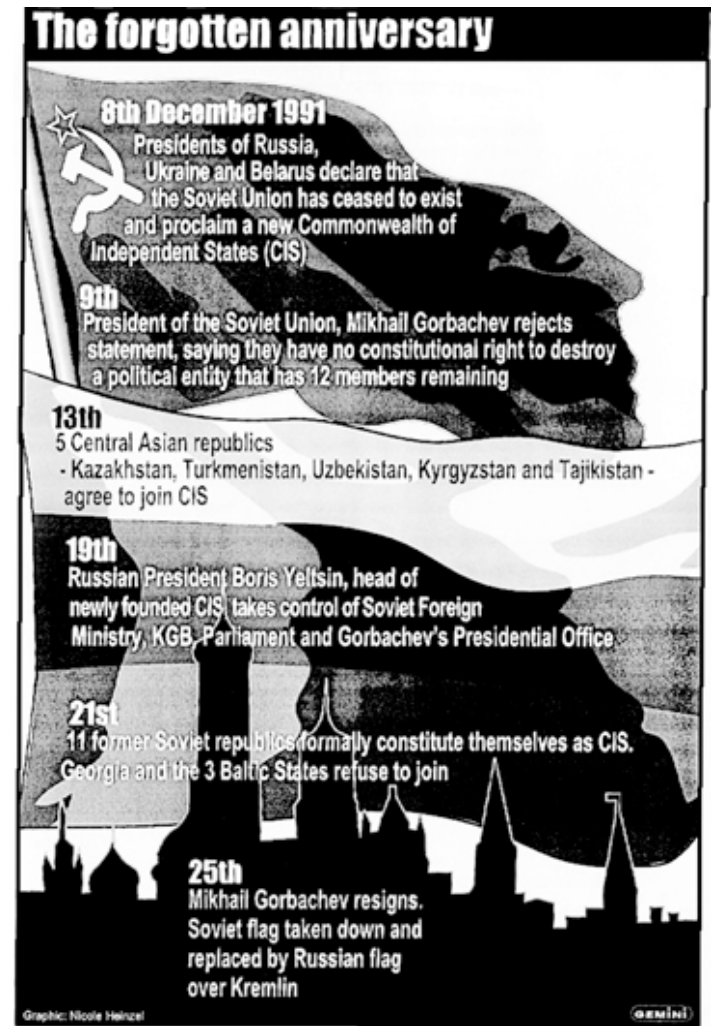
"The fall of the USSR was a failure for us, not a happy event. Of course it is more tempting to remember a battle we won 60 years ago than one we lost 10 years ago," says Ada Bykova, a Russian economist raised in the Urals but who has been living in Moscow since the change of regime occurred.

Unlike the Germans, who celebrated the 10th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall with great pomp and show, the Russians -- super-powers no more -- find nothing to open a bottle of champagne about.

President Vladimir Putin, in an interview with Newsweek magazine last month summed up the Russian ambivalence towards the events of 25 December 1991, when the Russian flag replaced the Soviet one atop the Kremlin.

"You would need to be heartless

On 25 December 1991, the Soviet flag was taken down from the mast overlooking the Kremlin and replaced by the Russian flag, an epoch-making symbolic moment that signalled the death of the Soviet Union. But nobody in Moscow feels like commemorating the event these days. For this is far from a festive occasion for Russians.



not to regret the disintegration of the Soviet Union," Putin said. "You would need to be brainless to want to restore it."

The government's attempt to focus public attention on the 60th anniversary of a WWII battle rather than on the birth of the CIS is no surprise. And in March this year, Vladimir Putin launched a five-year "patriotic education" plan in a bid to cheer up ordinary Russians.

The plan, he claims, will "re-educate Russians", help "restore the prestige of the army" and bring "respect for the Russian government."

A public campaign recalling the heroism of Soviet soldiers who pushed the Germans 200 kilometres from Moscow, regaining on the way control of tens of thousands of occupied villages and towns, is quite in line with Putin's project.

"Most people in Russia were raised with the idea that the army was one of our main prides," says Ekaterina Isaeva, a professor at the Russian State University for

Humanities. "People were raised for war. It is no surprise that they bring back these symbols. The feelings of Russians for their army is still deeply ingrained in them and pride is easy to reawaken."

She herself did not shed a tear when she heard that the Soviet Union was dying. She even spent three days and two nights in the barricades when in August 1991, a group of staunch communists tried to overthrow Gorbachev and seize power of the Supreme Soviet.

Boris Yeltsin, at the time head of the Russian republic, came to the rescue.

"We were thousands of people from all walks of life and we were not there to support Gorbachev. We were there because we were behind Yeltsin and we wanted something to happen. We were ready for a change," said Isaeva.

She was more than surprised, however, when the Soviet Union finally imploded. She was in France, for the first time in her life, after

studying French language, literature and culture for more than 15 years. The Soviet Union had barely fallen and she could already sense the impact.

"There was a lot of hope, mixed with apprehension about what would come next."

For Isaeva, as for Ada Bykova, who has worked at the International Red Cross for the last three years, the changes have been positive overall: they are allowed to travel, rewarded for speaking foreign languages and have made a comfortable life for themselves in Moscow. In major cities, there are many who have stood to gain from this transition.

Year 2000 was a good one for Russian economy with eight per cent growth. 2001 was a bit slower. Unemployment is reported to have fallen in these two years, though figures are disputed.

But most agree that progress is fragile, a point that was driven home precipitously when the rouble plunged in 1998. While one dollar fetched six roubles before the crash, it is now worth 30 roubles.

For more than 20 million people out of a population of 145 million, post-Soviet Russia has meant increasing poverty. They make less than a dollar a day -- a condition defined by the World Bank as one of absolute poverty -- in a country where the average monthly salary is closer to \$100.

Most of the poor are elderly people living on meagre government pensions. But not only pensioners miss those aspects of the Soviet era that benefited them. Surprisingly, the young too are reflective.

"Even if things seem to be getting better slowly, we can say one thing: we miss the stability of the Soviet Union," says Olga Blinovskaya, a 22-year-old university student in Moscow. "Back then, we had the insurance that we would have a roof over our heads and a job."

Blinovskaya well knows the price of economic instability. While Soviet era students received a monthly allowance and could afford to study without working, close to 80 per cent of university students now have to juggle studying and a job in order to survive.

Blinovskaya works 40 hours a week in an aluminium factory while studying for a law degree. She does not attend class, relying on her fellow-students' notes instead, which she studies at home. If she goes to school, it is to sit for an exam.

"That's what our lives have become, but I don't think we would ever want to turn back the clock," she says.

But then, she has no reason to party either. --*Gemini News*

Laura-Julie Perreault is a Canadian journalist with 'La Presse' newspaper in Montreal, currently working with Gemini News Service through a fellowship with Canada's International Development Research Center. She specialises in Russian affairs.