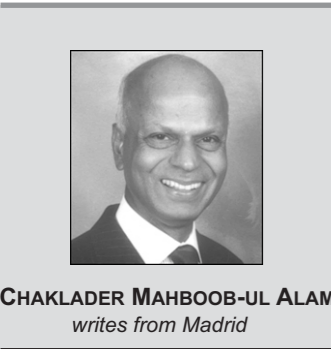


Palestine: An SOS call to the European Union



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM
writes from Madrid

POOR Palestinians! It appears that theirs is 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. As I write, 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 secu-

urity 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

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

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 Muslim 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

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 the Palestinians.

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 swathes 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 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 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 problem 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 posi-

tion 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). Europe can no longer sit on the fence. Time has come for it to act more decisively with whatever means it possesses to break the taboo and talk openly to the American and Israeli public about human rights ,broken promises , Jewish settlements in occupied territories and the Palestinian's right to live in peace and with human dignity . Europe must also tell the Israeli politicians that the holocaust can no longer be used as an excuse to exterminate an innocent people. It must also insist on sending observers to the occupied territories. The people there need international protection. I think Europe owes it to its conscience and to the long-suffering Palestinian people.

When yesterday's liberator becomes today's liability

WILSON JOHWA

AFEW weeks ago, a Belgian I had just met here in Dhaka forwarded me an email whose subject was "Please help, Zimbabwe needs you." The source of the letter was a media watchdog body, the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) that is based in the Namibian capital, Windhoek.

"This is an invitation for you to visit our web pages on the situation in Zimbabwe and do your bit for that embattled country," read the first part of the letter that was prompted by the beleaguered Harare government's newest attempts at curtailing freedom of the press.

Since I had been expecting something else when the Belgian announced that he had sent me mail, I was very surprised that the situation at home was so bad as to warrant an appeal to masses of faceless members of the international community. Coupled with the surprise was the embarrassment that President Mugabe and his coterie of self-serving sycophants, had reduced the country into being the latest African trouble spot and object of global concerned pity.

Not so long ago, many activists and other personalities around the world, including myself, had gotten used to receiving letters appealing for one to "spare a thought" for the people of Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda and such other countries in distress. The appeal on Zimbabwe had caught me off-guard. Despite the intensification of State-sponsored terror and its concomitant devastation of the Zimbabwe economy, dubbed the world's fastest deteriorating economy by the British-based *Economist* magazine last year, I had thought the situation would resolve itself. But of course this was an exercise in self-deception.

There are no rebels in Zimbabwe. Instead, Mugabe's once-popular government has been playing a double role: on the one hand terrorising anyone suspected on supporting the opposition and on the other pretending to be a well-intentioned Africanist government. Hence the election this weekend will be a watershed determining whether misrule continues for at least another six years.

However, even before polling begins, we are waiting with bated breaths, hoping that the presidential poll will usher in a new leader who will immediately begin the onerous task of repairing the economy and regaining the country's place in the sun. The desire in Zimbabwe is that after this weekend the political upheavals will be halted and the last two years will serve as a low point below which the country would strive not to sink. But right now the question that begs for an answer is: Where did it go wrong since Mugabe took over power with such promise 22 years ago?

This week a British newspaper, *The Sunday Telegraph*, reported that over the last three months Mugabe has sent more than £10 million through the Channel Islands. The transfer of the money is seen as a hint that he may flee the country if he loses the poll pitting him against his most formidable challenger ever, Morgan Tsvangirai of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The Sunday Telegraph said most of the money was moved through

financial institutions without their knowledge and that it ended up in Malaysia, with whom Mugabe has good relations.

Other reports are that the government has been slow in announcing election details and that polling stations have been deliberately kept at a minimum in the urban areas where support for the opposition is strongest. Indeed, as all indications are that the present government is determined to steal the election, a look at its once-revered leader's career is perhaps pertinent at this stage.

Born on February 21, 1924 at Kutama Mission north-west of the capital Harare, Robert Gabriel Mugabe had a Jesuit upbringing



Robert Gabriel Mugabe and as president regularly lectures Zimbabweans on morality. However, this did not prevent him from having two children by his young secretary, Grace, while his popular Ghanaian first wife, Sally, was dying from cancer. He married Grace in 1996. Immediately after, his political fortunes -- together with the country's economic performance -- began clinging.

Mugabe qualified as a primary school teacher at the age of 17 but took his first steps along the political path when he quit teaching to take up a scholarship at South Africa's black university, Fort Hare. There, before graduating with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1951, he came into contact with many of southern Africa's future black nationalist leaders.

After completing his bachelor's degree, he returned to the then Southern Rhodesia to teach, moving to Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) and later teaching in Ghana where he met and married his first wife.

In 1960 Mugabe returned home to enter politics. He first joined the nationalist group the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), but in 1964, after several arrests and a fall-out with its leadership, Mugabe went to Tanzania and joined the newly-formed Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU). ZANU inaugurated the war for independence that same year. Mugabe was detained along with several other nationalist leaders in 1964 and spent the next 10 years in prison camps and in jail.

He used those years to acquire six university degrees and to consolidate his position in ZANU. Emerging from prison in November 1974 as leader, Mugabe then left for neighbouring Mozambique, from where his banned party had begun launching guerilla attacks into Rhodesia.

After four more years of war, Mugabe and Joshua Nkomo, who

led the rival Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), entered negotiations with the Rhodesians, concluding with Zimbabwe's independence in April 1980. In elections just before independence, Mugabe and ZANU won by a landslide, and he became prime minister.

Upon assuming power, he announced a policy of reconciliation with the country's white minority, but now regularly blames them for many of Zimbabwe's problems. As the country's fortunes have deteriorated, he has tried to resurrect the nationalist agenda of the 1970s -- land and anti-colonialism.

He began a programme of free-market reforms in 1991, but the International Monetary Fund has suspended aid because, it says, the reforms are not on track. One sticking point in negotiations with the IMF has been Zimbabwe's involvement in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

The country's 10000-plus military deployment complements smaller contingents from Angola and Namibia which have also been propping up the Congolese government since the ouster of Mobutu Sese Seko three years ago. There is hardly any discernible reason for Zimbabwe's involvement in the Congo. Apart from being a costly enterprise for a small country of limited means, the Congo campaign is seen as merely a lucrative adventure for the political and military elite who are believed to be helping themselves to the Congo's abundant resources.

Mugabe, who has survived three assassination attempts since 1980, consolidated his power in 1987 when his party swallowed ZAPU in a unity accord. The man nick-named the Christopher Columbus of Africa for his numerous overseas trips, then assumed the position of executive president and unsuccessfully tried to impose a one-party state. Still, for 20 years his party had a free-rein in parliament since it had all but three seats in the 150-member chamber.

However, with the emergence of a strong and well-organised opposition two years ago, the ruling party lost 58 of those seats, triggering panic within the higher echelons of the party. Their response was to launch a campaign of terror and intimidation that seen the occupation of white-owned farms in the vain hope that the nationalist rhetoric of the liberation war would appeal to less sophisticated rural voters, who traditionally have been Mugabe's strongest support base.

The irony is that since Zimbabwe has the highest literacy rate in Africa -- thanks to Mugabe's policies -- the people have perhaps been better able to analyse events. With inflation now at three-digit levels, unemployed at a record 50 per cent and the country having to import food since farming and industry are hamstrung, many Zimbabweans will this weekend vote with their stomachs.

Wilson Johwa is a Zimbabwean journalist presently working for Drik Picture Library and Pathshala, the South Asian Institute of Photography, under the auspices of the Norwegian Fredskorset programme.

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 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 inquisitions 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 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

Actually, for nearly two thousand years the Jews in Europe had tried very hard to be assimilated into the Western culture . They had contributed in a significant manner to Western art, architecture ,literature and science. They had produced renowned philosophers and musicians. In commerce, banking and finance, their position was unparalleled. In almost every walk of life, they became enormously successful. (I write this with great admiration.) Yet, they were not accepted as full Europeans.-- they could feel anti-Semitism lurking just below the surface. Theodor Herzl, a famous Jewish lawyer and journalist , who had suffered anti-Semitism in Vienna became finally convinced that assimilation was impossible. In his pamphlet called *The Jewish State* (1896) , he advocated the establishment of a separate Jewish state in Palestine, which was at that time part of the Turkish empire. In 1897 the World Zionist Organisation 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 on the negotiations. The British