

London bombings and the dilemma of Muslims

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

THREE weeks have dramatically changed the lives of 1.6 million Muslims in the United Kingdom. The deadly terrorist attacks during the morning rush hour of 7/7 resulted in the death of 53 innocent people as well as four suicide bombers. Initially, the suspicion had been that foreign terrorists were behind the attacks, but the worst fear came true when the police identified four British Muslim citizens as the suspected bombers. Three of them were Pakistani-origin British citizens – born and brought up in UK. They had attended public schools and universities, and had visited Pakistan last year, where they reportedly got in touch with Al Qaida terrorists. The fourth suspect was a Jamaican-origin British resident who had recently converted to Islam. The shocked Muslim community in Britain categorically condemned this attack and their leadership underscored that killing of innocent civilians is not permitted under any pretext in Islam. Furthermore, Islamic scholars and *ulemas* have now given *fatwa* stating that suicide bombing is not permitted in Islam.

Multilingual, multiracial London braced the deadly terrorist attacks of 7/7 bravely and their reactions were largely shaped by the fact that the bombings were widely predicted by police and other government agencies. The Mayor of London, as well as the media, had apprehended that like Spain, Britain would be targeted by Al Qaida and other extremist groups for its involvement in the Iraq War. As a major colonial power, Britain had faced terrorist attacks in the past, and for the last three decades from the IRA. Naturally, they faced it more calmly than their cousins on the other side of the Atlantic. Of course, comparison may not be fair as America, prior to 9/11, had not faced any terrorist attack of that size and dimension, nor had it faced any external aggression on its soil. All the wars it had fought had been thousands of miles away from home.

The second attack exactly a fortnight latter, however, rattled the otherwise cool and composed Londoners. Almost like an action replay four assailants with explosives struck at three underground trains and a double-decker bus in London. Fortunately, the bombs did not explode this time and no one was hurt. The police seized the unexploded bombs and

other evidences. All four suspects have now been arrested, three in London and one in Rome. The suspects are East African origin Muslims, three from Somalia and one from Eritrea. They too are British citizens or residents who have been living in London for years. The fifth suspect who had reportedly left an unexploded bomb has also been detained and identified as the brother of one of the other suspects. During the massive manhunt the police raided several houses in London and Birmingham and have so far arrested nearly twenty people. Now that all the suspects are in police custody, it is expected that police would be able to identify the mastermind behind the plot. Are these two bombings linked? The suspect in Rome reportedly stated that they are not. It is crucial to know all the facts in order to thwart further attacks.

The Muslim community in UK would like to know what prompted these people to launch the barbaric attack against their fellow citizens. The victims of these attacks also include other Muslims; a Bangladeshi-origin British girl, Shahara Islam lost her life in the 7/7 attack. One can understand, even if one does not support, suicide bombings by Muslim militants to liberate their countries from foreign occupation in the Middle East. But why should they strike in London? The Muslim leaders in UK have reiterated that instead of promoting the cause of Islam, these attacks have only given a bad name to this great religion that stands for peace. The attacks have not in any way promoted the cause of suppressed Muslims under foreign occupation; they have jeopardised the lives of millions of Muslims living in UK and the western world.

While unable to contain its militants the mainstream Muslims, who are moderate and peace-loving, have helplessly looked on as the Islam-phobia campaign was launched by certain vested circles in the Western world that, in effect, has created deeper polarisation and strengthened extremists on both sides. The British Muslims are currently passing their days in great anxiety. Their businesses are down, popular South Asian restaurants are nearly empty and professionals have suddenly become "suspects" in the eyes of their colleagues. In fact, the entire South Asian community, and now the East Africans, are living under constant threat of attacks from hooligans and closer scrutiny by law enforcement

According to latest Guardian/ CM poll survey, tens of thousands of Muslims have suffered from increased Islam-phobia, with one in five saying they or a family member have faced abuse or hostility. The poll also indicated that in the past three weeks police have recorded more than 1,200 suspected Islam-phobic incidents across Britain ranging from verbal abuse to one murder. The actual figure is believed to be higher.



PHOTO: AFP

A South Asian origin passenger's baggage being searched at Liverpool station, July 29: Closer scrutiny

authorities. According to latest Guardian/ CM poll survey, tens of thousands of Muslims have suffered from increased Islam-phobia, with one in five saying they or a family member have faced abuse or hostility. The poll also indicated that in the past three weeks police have recorded more than 1,200 suspected Islam-phobic incidents across Britain ranging from verbal abuse to one murder. The actual figure is believed to be higher. Surprisingly, nearly two-thirds of Muslims told the pollsters that they are concerned about their future in Britain after these attacks, with 63 per cent saying they had considered whether they wanted to remain in the UK.

More importantly, the same poll finds a near total rejection of violence by Muslims with nine in 10 believing it has no place in a political struggle, and they expressed their resolve to help police tackle the Muslim extremists. Fifty-five percent of the Muslims [as compared to 68% of all Britons] acknowledge that their clerics' and

leaders' inability to root out extremists is a factor behind the attacks. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds Muslims identify racist and Islam-phobic behaviour as a cause compared to 57% of all Britons.

Ironically, it was the West which had promoted contemporary Islamic militancy about two decades ago, to liberate Afghanistan from the Soviet intervention. It was at that time that Osama Bin Laden and other Mujahideen fighters had received equipment and training from the West through Pakistan, and they had succeeded in forcing Soviets to withdraw from Afghanistan. However, once the Soviets withdrew, the West lost interest in Afghanistan and its mujahideen partners. Due to internal fights among different war lords, Afghanistan drifted towards anarchy, and a dangerous power vacuum was created which encouraged extremist organisation like Al-Qaida to gain foothold in Afghanistan. When a Taliban regime took over in Kabul and committed excesses in the name of

Islam, overwhelming majority of Muslim countries refused to recognize them. Initially, only three out of 55 Muslim countries had extended recognition, but subsequently two withdrew their recognition.

Many Muslims believe that after the demise of the Soviet Union, the Islamic world was made the new ideological target for the West. The genocide of Muslims in Bosnia-Herzegovina, persecutions in Chechnya and Kosovo and, above all, the developments in Palestine and in occupied territories created deeper division between the West and Muslim world. After 9/11 almost all the Muslim countries had extended full cooperation to the West in its war against terror. But this consensus evaporated when, instead of fighting the international terrorists, Washington, supported by London and a few others launched the military campaign against Iraq. The Islamic world had no love for Saddam, who through his ill-conceived military campaigns against its two Muslim neighbours,

Iran and Kuwait, had not only depleted precious common resources but had also significantly reduced political clout of the Islamic world; but they opposed the war as it was launched without any sanction from the United Nations.

The ongoing devastating war in Iraq, the death of thousands of innocent civilians, excesses in Abu Ghraib prisons, desecration of Holy Koran, and spiraling violence in Palestine and occupied territories, have created new fury in the Islamic world. Al-Qaida and other militant groups took advantage of the rage to recruit terrorists in different parts of the world for undertaking barbaric attacks against civilians. A few Muslim countries have also faced these attacks. Iraq has emerged as a major terror center. While Washington is too preoccupied with Iraq, militants in Afghanistan have largely regrouped themselves and intensified their attacks. After nearly four years of the war on terror, Osama bin Laden still remains at large and the acts of terrorism continue unabated.

Is there any connection between the terrorist attacks in London and the war in Iraq? Well, Prime Minister Tony Blair has strongly defended his government's action and has emphatically denied any such connection. He has also mentioned that such terrorist attacks were launched even before the Iraq war. On the other hand, according to another poll conducted by the Communications Research for Sky News, sixty percent British respondents 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that there is a connection and they asserted that by joining the Washington-led invasion of Iraq the Blair Government had placed Londoners in jeopardy vis-à-vis the Muslim extremists.

In a recent report, the Royal Institute of International Affairs, known as Chatham House, also shared this perception and stated that UK was at particular risk, by being the closest ally of the United States, by deploying armed forces in the military campaigns in Afghanistan and in Iraq, and by taking a leading role in international intelligence, police and judicial co-operation against al-Qaida, and by trying to suppress al-Qaida's

finances. They also warned that the Iraq war had actually helped al-Qaida's recruitment and fundraising, and fueled its propaganda, had turned Afghanistan into an ideal targeting and training ground for al-Qaida terrorists, and had redirected resources that could have been used to assist the Karzai government to capture Bin Laden. The British government's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre recently concluded that the invasion of Iraq had created "a motivation and a focus for a range of terrorist-related activity in the UK".

Athe London bombings, British law enforcement authorities have been given sweeping powers to prevent recurrence of such incidents, including the authority to shoot-to-kill. Unfortunately, the very first application of the policy resulted in the killing of an innocent Brazilian electrician, of Asian appearance. While the British government defended its policy and apologised for the unfortunate death, the incident created panic among Asians who believed that they are being specifically targeted.

The vast majority of British believe that this is not the time to aggravate the apparent division in the society, but instead to undertake confidence-building measures and genuine dialogue so that the entire population and law enforcement authorities could jointly fight against the common enemy, terrorism. For centuries London has been the centre for promotion of freedom and liberty, but they believe all these traditions are being weakened by mindless violence by extremists and the excesses by law enforcement authorities.

As history has shown, the most effective way to fight terrorism is to address and resolve the "root cause", thus divesting the terrorists of popular support. The political settlement of Northern Ireland, and the IRA's recent decision to forsake arms to resolve political issue, clearly demonstrate this point. Britain has a much better knowledge of Iraq, Palestine and Middle-East than any other power and has greater acceptability in the international arena. It is high time that they take initiative to restore justice and peace in the region.

The fact that the London bombings were done not by foreign terrorists but by Britain's own youth also poses new challenges. It is obvious that these youth, born or brought up in Britain, did not resort to terrorist attacks to register their "opposition to western way of life or opposition to freedom and

democracy", as espoused by western leaders as the cause of terrorist attacks. Were these suspects simply trying to register their protests against their government's policies? Some sociologists have stressed that this younger generation of Muslim Brits, unlike the preceding generation, are not afraid to take these drastic steps to redress injustices towards Muslims.

Experts have time and again pointed out that alienation of a particular community and racial profiling will create incalculable long-term damages. Furthermore, demonising Islam for the crimes committed by a few will only deepen polarisation and create more disillusioned youth, who would in turn resort to terrorism. Multi-lingual and multi-racial Britain, therefore, has to initiate a genuine dialogue to ensure its security without surrendering its unique position as the global centre for freedom and justice. It will be a delicate tightrope walk indeed.

How will the London bombings impact the nearly six million Muslims living in the United States? For one thing, the Muslims in America, though larger in number than in Britain, are smaller in proportion to the population of the country and are spread over a larger land than Britain. Furthermore, they are not as organised and politically conscious as their counterparts in Britain. Naturally, they have much smaller political clout and are more vulnerable. The bombings came at an opportune moment for the Bush Administration as the controversial Patriot Act was coming up for renewal at the US Senate. The Senate, in a unanimous vote on Friday, has passed the bill making 14 out of 16 anti-terrorism provisions permanent. As a compromise the lawmakers agreed to include additional civil rights safeguards and pre-empt any expansion of the Administration's counter-terrorism powers. It may be recalled that the Patriot Act, passed in the aftermath of 9/11, gave the Administration immense search and surveillance powers to hunt down terrorists. The bill, however, attracted criticism as it had encroached on civil liberties.

The writer, a former Foreign Secretary, sent this article from US

Media the worst enemy!

A.N.M. NURUL HAQUE

AT last, the Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman has identified the media to be the worst enemy of the country. He branded the local media as the worst enemy of the country for projecting only negative images of the country. "Bangladesh has made a lot of progress and substantial achievements in all the fields compared to other South Asian countries. But the media do not reflect our achievements," he said while addressing the concluding session of a two-day workshop on July 25.

The finance minister, who in recent days has become noted for bashing the media, blasted the national newspapers for publishing "false news" and thus tarnishing the country's image abroad. He stated in a seminar on March 12 that some 100 to 150 newspapers caused maximum damage to the country. Not the finance minister alone, some other ministers such as Moulana Nizami, Barrister Moudud Ahmed, and Barrister Nazmul Huda hardly miss any opportunity for bashing journalists. Moudud Ahmed has termed the freedom of press as the "freedom to lie" and Nazmul Huda on October 21, 2004, publicly mused as to "whether the journalists should be brought under the jurisdiction of the Rab for their information terrorism."

Bangladesh has been ranked 17th in the global ranking of failed states by American magazine Foreign Policy. The magazine published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, based in Washington, made the observation in its July-August issue, which grouped Bangladesh with 20 countries deemed most critical and vulnerable. The Failed States Index was prepared in collaboration with the Fund for Peace, and used 12 social, economic, political, and military indicators to rank 60 countries in order of their vulnerability to violent internal conflict. In the two indicators of uneven development and criminalisation, Bangladesh scored highest.

Bangladesh has been termed "the most dysfunctional country in Asia" by the Asia Times in its issue of April 15, 2004. World Bank Country Director Christine Wullich has termed Bangladesh a "fragile state." Torkel Patterson, the US Deputy Assistant Secretary for South Asian Affairs, who visited Bangladesh in September 2004, expressed concern at the incidents of violence and terrorism taking place in Bangladesh, and said that our democracy is fragile. The US

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has said that Bangladesh is becoming "quite troubling" and there is more that the US and India could do. US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca, who visited the country in last May, also made similar comments.

Ranking of Bangladesh as the most corruption-afflicted country in the world by Transparency International for the fourth successive year, has caused maximum damage to the country's image abroad. Frederick Temple, the former country director of the World Bank in Bangladesh, stated in unmistakable terms on many occasions that the present rate of reduction of poverty in the country would double if the government could control the unabated corruption in the country. The development partners of Bangla-

rising concern among the development partners, the government was compelled to take action against the Islamic extremists and banned two Islamic extremist organisations.

The Economist published an article entitled "Bangladesh: State of Denial" in its June 18 issue, with a comical picture of Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, suggesting a brawl between them. Such a comical picture of our country's top leaders published in an international weekly of wide circulation, is not only regrettable but also shameful for the nation.

The story in the article, however, presents a different picture altogether and a few lines are quoted hereunder. "Bangladesh is also among the most sparsely covered by the international press. This is in part the government's

publishing news of the presidential pardon granted to a person who was convicted of a double murder, only because the convict happens to be a ruling party man. The newspapers reported the price hike of essential commodities and the eventual denial of such realities by the commerce minister as well as by the prime minister. The newspapers also reported the persecution of the Ahmadiya community by an Islamic extremist group. These are the truth. The government cannot escape from this fact. The finance minister recently said: "Corruption has gripped every ministry of the government." A country that came into being after the supreme sacrifice of millions now stands as a failing state in the international arena. It is really a matter of great regret and shame for the nation.

It is very unfortunate that many of our ministers foster an attitude that the journalists are "the root of all evil" and are always out to destroy the image of the country by publishing false news. It is small-minded for ministers to expect that journalists would always laud the government, ignoring their ethical responsibility to uphold the truth. It is really most unfortunate when a respectable person like the finance minister maligns journalists by stating that educated people getting no job engage in this profession and continuously write reports on the price of commodities to criticise the government.

The government has decided to get some supplements published in ten important dailies and weeklies of the US and UK, at the cost of our hard earned foreign exchange, in order to improve its image and publicise its "successes." The supplements will be published from October 1, on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the government. An "Image Salvaging Committee" comprising selected journalists and intellectuals is preparing articles lauding the "successes" of the government.

There is no denying that Bangladesh suffers from a poor image abroad for various reasons. Earlier, the government formed a committee headed by the foreign minister to suggest ways to improve the country's image. The recent spate of bomb blasts and killing of some important political leaders and extra-judicial killings by Rab have severely damaged the country's image abroad. The poor journalists, who do not lack in patriotism, are not to blame.

The author is an assistant general manager, Sonali Bank.

SM ABDUR RAHMAN

WHEN Thailand reported its first human death caused by avian influenza (in January 2004), the government took a bold step to protect our poultry industry from the spread of the virus. Imports of parent stock chicks (chicks from which local hatcheries breed broiler and layer chicks) were banned from several Asian countries. Most of the banned countries (Pakistan, Vietnam, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) had already reported or have since reported avian influenza outbreaks. Two of the banned countries (India and Malaysia) have not reported outbreaks; they were banned because they were rumoured to have outbreaks. The ban was successful; there has not yet been any outbreak of avian influenza in Bangladesh.

However, many small hatcheries have been pressuring the Ministry of Livestock to relax the ban to allow imports of parent stock chicks from India. Their argument is that the ban on importing parent stock chicks from India forces them to import more expensive parent stock chicks from Europe. These hatcheries feel that we should trust the Indian government's claim that India is free from avian influenza.

On the other side of the argument are Paragon and Kazi Farms. These large hatcheries have imported grand-parent stock chicks from Europe and are now producing parent stock chicks locally. They have argued that the ban should continue because India is experiencing outbreaks of low pathogenic avian influenza (LPAI) which the Indian government is covering up to support Indian poultry exports. According to this argument, allowing imports from India would risk importing avian influenza, which would destroy our local poultry industry.

Until now, neither side has been able to offer any proof as to whether or not avian influenza actually existed in India. However, a team of scientists working at Advance Laboratories with Dr. M.M. Khan (one of the best known poultry experts in Bangladesh) has conducted several trials on Indian poultry vaccines. These trials prove conclusively that avian influenza type H9 does exist in India.

Dr. Khan heard from his contacts in the Indian industry that avian influenza was widespread and that farmers were vaccinating their chickens to protect their investment.

Poultry Expert Dr. MM Khan observes that contrary to the claims of the Indian Government, avian influenza (type H9) is present in India. The Indian poultry industry would neither be manufacturing nor using an avian influenza vaccine unless they had already experienced widespread avian influenza outbreaks. The Indian government's claim that India is free from avian influenza is not credible.



It was heard from contacts in the Indian industry that avian influenza was widespread and that farmers were vaccinating their chickens to protect their investment. However, the poultry industry wanted to cover up the avian influenza outbreak.

However, as the Indian poultry industry wanted to cover up the avian influenza outbreak, the avian influenza vaccines were combined with Newcastle (Ranikhet) disease vaccine and labelled simply as vaccines for Newcastle (Ranikhet) disease.

Dr. Khan managed to procure a few vials of Indian vaccines labeled as "Newcastle Disease Vaccine Inactivated I.P. Vet." and "Variant Ranikhet Disease Experimental Vaccine". He then conducted scientific trials with these vaccines. In one trial he administered the vaccine to 25 chickens (the trial group). 25 other chickens (the control group) were not vaccinated.

Before vaccination, all 50 chickens tested negative for Avian Influenza antibodies. When the chickens were tested again 34 days after vaccination, the entire trial group was positive for avian flu antibodies, while the entire control group was still negative. The trial group also showed increased level of Newcastle (Ranikhet) Disease antibodies after vaccination. These trials were repeated and results were similar. This shows conclusively that the vaccines were in fact a combined vaccine against Avian Influenza and Newcastle (Ranikhet) Disease.

Further tests at Dr. Khan's lab indicated that the vaccine produced

antibodies for avian influenza type H9. This type of influenza is not as dangerous as the "highly pathogenic" type H5N1 which has killed many people in Hong Kong, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, and recently in Indonesia. Type H9 is "low pathogenic" and has not (at least not as far as we know) killed any humans. However, influenza viruses are known to mutate very quickly; a virus which is "low pathogenic" today may become "highly pathogenic" in a few months, given the right conditions.

Dr. Khan concludes that contrary to the claims of the Indian Government, avian influenza (type H9) is present in India. The Indian poultry industry would neither be manufacturing nor using an avian influenza vaccine unless they had already experienced widespread avian influenza outbreaks. He feels that now that we have hard scientific evidence of avian influenza in India, the Ministry of Fisheries & Livestock should continue its ban on imports of poultry and poultry products from India. The Indian government's claim that India is free from avian influenza is not credible.

Dr. Khan adds that his research has found plenty of reputable sources which support his conclusions.

Dr. H.K. Pradhan, Joint Director of the High Security Animal Disease Laboratory (HSADL) of the Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI) in Bhopal, made the following statement in a paper: "So far 3,074 serum and 1,311 tissue samples were examined for avian influenza, of which 313 were positive for antibodies and 25 were positive for the virus. All the samples were positive for H9N2 subtype only."

This paper: "Recent Development in Avian Influenza and its Zoonotic Importance" was presented by Dr. Pradhan at the National Symposium on Influenza (April 5, 2005, at the Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute at the University of Delhi). Thus, the HSADL has also found hard evidence of avian influenza in India, and has gone on record as saying so.

The Indian Express reported on May 11 that the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, USA, confirmed that blood samples from three workers at a poultry farm in India tested positive to avian influenza type H5N1. This was also reported by Asian Poultry in their July 2005 issue.

The author is a researcher.