

## We're all Palestinians now

So the next time you hear bigoted comments, or see injustice, do something small. Light a candle in the knowledge that light overcomes darkness, and millions of candles coalesce to drive back the night of despair. Remember Edmund Burke's warning: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for enough good men to do nothing."

BRIAN COBB

**V**IOLENCE is the world's leading public health problem. It causes more untimely death and disability than anything else. As I write this, more than 1,000 Palestinians have died and nearly 5,000 injured. Tens of thousands have been psychologically injured or left homeless. Watching one horrid image after another leaves us feeling angry, sad, and powerless.

Overt violence is merely the tip of the iceberg, the most obvious, but not the most common or damaging form. The social and economic violence of lack of opportunity, extreme poverty, discrimination, humiliation, and denial of the essentials of life is the leading cause of many diseases. The Palestinian people have suffered more from this type of violence than from the more newsworthy military aggression and subsequent atrocities, and the terrorism that allegedly provoked the war arose from profound and longstanding structural violence.

Modern epidemiological concepts can help us understand the endemic and epidemic violence destroying the world. "Ro" is the term for the reproduction rate of the disorder, i.e. the number of people subsequently infected by one infected person. If the Ro is >1, each case will infect enough others to create a cascade of increasing incidence: an epidemic.

The higher the Ro, the faster the spread and the greater the number affected. If Ro =

1, you have a stable prevalence whereby the number affected remains constant. But if Ro is <1, there will be fewer and fewer cases over time and the disease will disappear.

Violence is rooted in attitudes. We're not machines or pigeons in which a given stimulus always elicits a given response; between stimulus and response lies choice, the essence of free-will and the basis of accountability. Accordingly, our attitudes determine how we will respond. Attitudes are memes, socially constructed and transmitted entities.

We get these memes from people, our culture, our religion, the things we watch, listen to or read, and the thoughts we think. Our free will allows us to question and accept or reject the memes to which we are exposed. The thoughtful person isn't a passive receptacle for memes, and many memes conflict.

Overt social and economic violence happen because enough people have accepted the memes that support it. Even though violence is an acceptable, or even desirable solution to problems. One is that the victims of violence somehow deserve it; they poor deserve the suffering because they are lazy or wicked; war victims deserve it because they are members of a society that has done something wrong; battered women or children deserve it because they have misbehaved. Another violence-enabling meme holds that it is inevitable, and to be accepted and not questioned.

Memes are dynamic. The meme of slavery was once universally accepted. But during the late Enlightenment of the early 19th century, people began to question the meme. The emotion that led to its destruction is empathy, coupled with a sense that we ought to treat others as we'd like to be treated. The concept of women and children as chattels, or the property of their fathers or husbands, has lost ground due to empathy.

I'm an American, a professor, a chemist, and micro-biologist with a medical degree in the specialties of internal medicine and critical care. I work in Bangladesh caring for the poorest and most vulnerable, mostly children, in the intensive care unit and HIV/Aids ward of which I'm in charge.

I've spent years in trauma centres and cared for people in war zones. I've seen the many faces of violence and know how ugly they all are. The world is full of suffering and injustice, and I alone can't change it or alleviate more than an infinitesimal fraction of it.

By teaching others I can extend my reach exponentially, but the cumulative effect is still a drop of relief in an ocean of suffering. So why bother? Because, as Rabbi Hillel said: "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, then what am I? If not me, who? If not now, when?" Or, as Margaret Mead said: "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

But not everyone is vouchsafed the opportunity of doing humanitarian work, so what can the rest do? Quite a bit, it turns out. When you hear someone express intolerance towards an ethnic, religious, socio-economic, national or sexual group, don't just sit in silence and implicitly condone it.

While denunciation and personal attacks make things worse rather than better, a gentle "You know, I used to feel that way too, but I can't agree with you. Not all of them are the same, and every group



The light of hope.

has some good and some bad members. If you were in their situation, you might very well feel differently than you now do. Give them a chance and you'll change your mind," or something similar, sometimes changes minds.

The meme seeds you plant won't always germinate, and over time things change, and even a small change of Ro can tip an epidemic into extinction. You can also immunise people against hateful memes by modeling tolerance and compassion.

By challenging prejudice you inculcate empathy that expands to cover more and more people, eventually all of humanity. Intolerance is a meme, but one in competition with the meme of tolerance.

When I see the suffering, the atrocities,

the destruction heaped upon the people in Palestine by those from Israel, I see the humanity of the victims and the inhumanity of their assailants.

I marvel that Jews, Christians, and Muslims believe that humans were created in the image of God, but can't see that image in the face of a child or a woman or an elderly person -- or, more challengingly, in the face of the perpetrator who claims to be doing God's work in butchering His children.

When I see doctors refusing to care for their moral vision is blinded to God's image in the suffering and their hands are paralysed by irrational fear and ignorance. When I see affluent citizens cheat a hungry rickshaw puller of a few taka as they

hurry off to the mosque pray to the God in whose image that wretched labourer was created, I consider that a tiny act of generosity wouldn't substantially affect the passenger but may make the difference between food and starvation for the worker's family. All are evidence of empathic failure.

So the next time you hear bigoted comments, or see injustice, do something small. Light a candle in the knowledge that light overcomes darkness, and millions of candles coalesce to drive back the night of despair. Remember Edmund Burke's warning: "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for enough good men to do nothing."

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## Begins a new democratic culture

She honoured honesty and educated candidates, and rejected corrupt or controversial MPs and/or any family members. It is most notable that three women took the very important positions of prime minister, foreign minister, and home minister in the new government.

NIRMAL L. GOMES

**M**ANY news reports, editorials, and articles about the general election were published in Bangladesh in last two years. There was confusion whether the military would take over or a general election would be held! It was very challenging for the Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, the Election Commissioner (EC), and the Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed to prove that the interim government would hold the general election as promised.

Finally, on December 29, 2008, a fair, neutral, and peaceful general election set to rest all doubts. The hard work of the caretaker government, reformed election regulations by the EC, the military's active support, and cooperation of the political parties finally paid off.

The Awami League-led Grand Alliance won 263 seats, the BNP-led four-party alliance won only 31 seats, and independents won 4 seats. The entire population wanted a change as never before, and there was a mass upsurge in favour of the change promised by Awami League and Grand Alliance leader Sheikh Hasina. Her election slogan "Charter for Change-Vision 2021" attracted young voters.

BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia claimed that it was an unfair election and

rejected the result. If the election had been fair, BNP would have won, as Khaleda Zia said. She was disappointed with the role of the law enforcers and the administration during the election.

Sheikh Hasina has formed her cabinet with fresh, honest, educated, experienced politi-

cians, and technocrats to blood a new generation of untainted leaders, and she must be credited for her willingness to select such new faces. She honoured honesty and educated candidates, and rejected corrupt or controversial MPs and/or any family members. It is most notable that three women took the very important positions of prime minister, foreign minister, and home minister in the new government.

A change in the democratic political culture is that BNP members attended the oath-taking ceremony of the new cabinet. Indeed, BNP lawmakers-elect decided to take oath and join the first session of the parliament. Party sources said the BNP lawmakers-elect might attend first day's proceedings of the ninth

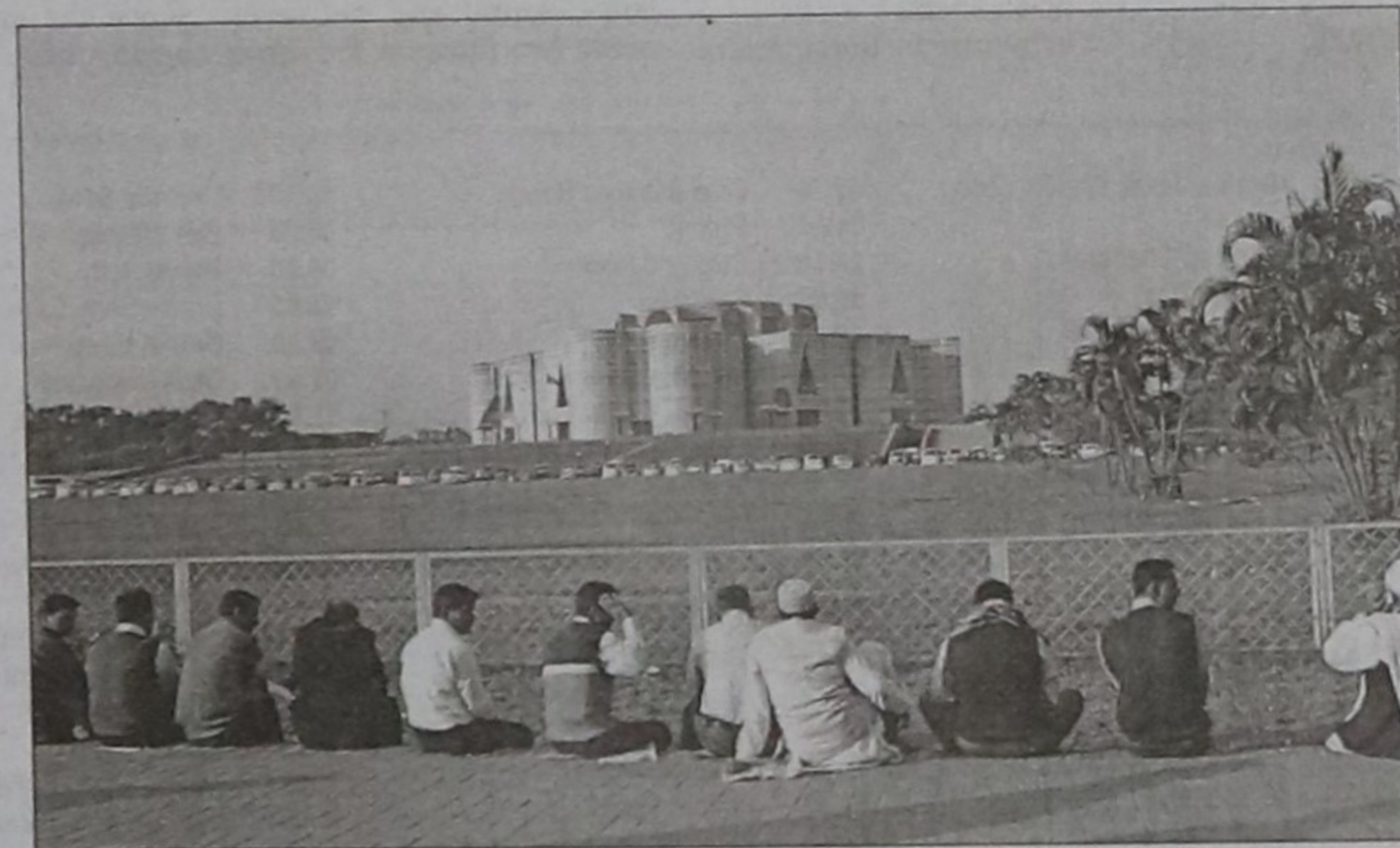
parliament. "We shall join the first session of the parliament for the sake of democracy, the country's interest, and to continue the democratic process," Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, a senior party leader and an MP-elect, told reporters after a two-hour meeting of the BNP's parliamentary party.

"We hope that our Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will continue to express the same kind of tolerance that she did in her post-election media conference," he said. In addition, the BNP leader said: "We are pledging that we will do whatever is necessary to keep the government accountable to the parliament." It seems that the BNP might bring a positive political culture, and try to keep pressure on the new government to fulfill the commitments made before the election.

All these issues, and monitoring the inexperienced ministers in the cabinet will be a big challenge for Sheikh Hasina. But if the new cabinet members are aware of their responsibilities and know their mandates, of course, they can make a big difference. Indeed, the government and the opposition party must change their political behaviour and attitude in order to create an effective parliament and democratic society in the nation.

The voters believe that they have selected the persons who can think well, talk well, and do good things to bring a positive change in the nation. They believe that the new government will be able to create an effective democratic environment through its activities and actions.

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Great expectations.

## Bridging the divide

Ipsa facto, special relations exist between Pakistan and Bangladesh, which are characterised by religious affinity and commonality of views. Let us cash in on this special status and go ahead with plans that benefit equally the masses of the two brotherly countries.

SAYED G.B. BOKHARI

**I** had visited the land of the Golden Fibre twice before. Once in March 1971, when it was known as East Pakistan, and again in 2005, to an independent state, Bangladesh. This visit to Dhaka is the hat-trick.

In 1971, I was a major serving in Pakistan army's 16 Division, and the visit was melancholic as a very tense and hostile environment was prevailing then. In 2005, as members of an "Old Boys" delegation from Pakistan, we were accorded a red carpet welcome by our hosts, the Sargodhians Old Boys' Association (SOBA), Dhaka Chapter.

The then Royal Pakistan Air Force planned to establish a school in Sargodha, Pakistan, to prepare students who would feed the nascent air force or provide leadership in any walk of national life. For the establishment and administration of the school, and for imparting state-of-the-art education and grooming of the students the services of a British firm, Air Training Inc., were requisitioned.

The school, named Royal Pakistan Air Force

Public School, took off in Sargodha in March 1953 with one hundred students, including a sizeable number from the Eastern wing. The British firm finished its contract in 1958, but left an institution whose students have excelled in the armed forces, civil service, education, science, and business in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and the international community.

The former students are known as Sargodhians. The golden jubilee of the establishment of the school was celebrated in 2003, and was followed by a commemoration in Dhaka in 2005. Both the occasions attracted jubilant Sargodhians from all over the world. The gathering of Sargodhians in Dhaka is a corollary to exchange of visits, particularly between Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Though Sargodhians are playing a significant role in forging a friendly relationship between Pakistan and Bangladesh, this goodwill should be strengthened by people-to-people contacts. We cannot turn the clock back on 1971. We should look to the future and not stay mired in the complexities of the past. The first step should be the removal of restrictions on visas.

The lure of better employment continues to draw streams of Bangladeshis who adopt illegal means of travel. These people remain stranded in Pakistan since none can go back because they do not possess legal documents. Increase in travel between the two countries will boost economy as the services industry will have to cater for the increased number of visitors. Both Pakistan International Airlines and Bangladesh Biman will have a roaring business if they give discounts on tickets.

There has been a substantial increase in trade between Pakistan and Bangladesh over the past decade, from \$16.96 million in 2000-2001 to \$33.4 million in 2006-2007. Nonetheless, it can be jacked up to \$2 billion. Pakistan can export its raw cotton, cotton yarn, finished and unfinished textile products, urea fertiliser, and cement. Bangladesh can export raw jute, jute products, tea, and fabrics.

Before 1971, the entire requirement of tea consumers in West Pakistan was met from the tea gardens from this region. Increased volume of exports of tea from Bangladesh to Pakistan will forge stronger financial ties between the two countries, over a cup of tea.

The two countries can intensify bilateral cooperation in the area of defence. Pakistan can make up the defence requirements of Bangladesh by assisting in the overhauling of Bangladesh air force aircraft, and selling communication equipment. Pakistan manufactures JF-17 Thunder aircraft, and Al-Khalid and Al-Zarrar tanks, which can be inducted in the

Bangladesh armed forces. Through a joint venture the T-59 tanks of Bangladesh army can be upgraded.

Ties can be further cemented by holding joint training exercises, military training courses, joint ventures in defence production, and purchase of defence equipment. Instructors and student officers at the Staff College and other military training institutions can be exchanged on mutual basis.

During his recent official visit to Pakistan, the chief of the Bangladesh army and a fellow Sargodhian, General Moeen U. Ahmad, met his counterpart General Ashfaq Pervez Kayani, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Tariq Majid, and Defence Minister Chaudhry Ahmed Mukhtar, and called on President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Sayed Yousuf Raza Gilani.

In these parleys, General Moeen expressed interest in purchasing military equipment from Pakistan and in pursuing joint ventures. They discussed strategic issues to develop common understanding, and expressed a desire to intensify bilateral cooperation in the area of defence.

Ipsa facto, special relations exist between Pakistan and Bangladesh, which are characterised by religious affinity and commonality of views. Let us cash in on this special status and go ahead with plans that benefit equally the masses of the two brotherly countries.

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## Explaining war in Gaza to children

NURY VITACHIL

Chapter one

Once upon a time, there was a family called Pal. They lived in a property which was hot and dusty, but they liked it, and had lived there for more than 2,000 years. Then one day, they had some visitors. "We are the Izzy family," said the head of the new arrivals. "And we're moving in."

"What?" said the Pal family. "You can't do that." "Yes, we can," said Mr Izzy. "THEY said we could." The newcomers pointed to some heavily armed "minders" who were accompanying them. Their names were Usa and Uk.

"Hi," said the biggest one. "I am here to tell you that Izzy and his family have suffered terrible trauma. They need a new home."

"I sympathize," said Mr Pal. "But this is our home, and it's very small. Why don't you give them space in your homes?"

"They want to live here, because their ancestors lived here," said Usa.

"But that's not fair," the Pal family objected. There was an impasse. The Pal wider community was called to adjudicate.

Chapter two

The Izzy family said the issue could be boiled down to one simple question: "The Izzy family has a right to exist, yes or no?"

The giant Usa agreed enthusiastically: "Yes, we declare that the Izzy family definitely has the right to exist." "Hang on," said a member of the Pal family. "The issue is not whether the Izzy family has a right to exist. It's whether they have the right to exist ON OUR PROPERTY."

Usa looked deeply shocked. "Outrageous! You're saying the Izzy family do not have the right to exist, so that automatically makes you a group of genocidal terrorists. Now you're in trouble."

The Pal family members were at a loss about what to do. They realized that they needed a powerful friend, too. They took the matter to court. The chief judge was a man named Yuen, sometimes spelt UN. Yuen talked to many members of the community, including Ms. Asia, Mr. France and so on. They all agreed the situation was fundamentally unfair. Judge Yuen passed several edicts to make the situation fairer.

But the Izzy family ignored these edicts, and were fully supported by Usa.

Chapter three

The Izzy family got bigger and stronger and tougher and richer. The Pal family got poorer and poorer. Years of unfairness and abuse resulted in the inevitable.

One desperate, tormented member of the Pal family, a man named Hamas, couldn't take it any more. He went off the rails and started to fight back.

In retaliation, the Izzy family unleashed a massive wave of violence.

"Please stop," said the Pal family, after 900 members of their family had been killed.

Judge Yuen and many members of the international community called for the invasion to stop.

But the most powerful member, Usa, told the Izzy family to continue the slaughter, explaining that the horrible injuries to the Pal family were all their own fault. "The Izzy family has a right to exist," Usa said. "And it has the right to defend itself." And they all lived miserably ever after.

Epilogue

It's a sad story, isn't it? There's just one way this tale can have a different ending. The new US administration needs to remember the words of Abraham Lincoln, forgotten by the old US administration: "There's only way to destroy your enemy: make him your friend."