

BOTTOM LINE

Bangladesh, a model of communal harmony



BARRISTER HARUN UR RASHID

OUR nation is a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation of 160 million people. All citizens practice their respective religions freely and peacefully, a right guaranteed by the Constitution of Bangladesh. During his five-day visit to Bangladesh from April 25, His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue in Vatican, passed a busy time. It is noted that his visit was confined to only Bangladesh in South Asia. On April 27, Cardinal Tauran spoke at the Interfaith Dialogue at the Bangabandhu International Conference Centre where Bangladesh minister for religious affairs and minister for cultural affairs were present. Cardinal Tauran, at the beginning of his speech, expressed happiness that Bangladesh is considered "as an example of how it is possible for people of different religions to live together, cooperate together and simply be together."

based in Bengali culture? Is it based in constitutional realities? Is it based in the history of the country? Is it based in the realm of religions themselves and in particular in Islam as it is followed here? I leave the answers to the experts."

On the importance of the Interfaith Dialogue, Cardinal Tauran emphasised that such dialogues should be understood as an essential ingredient in preserving a plurastic society by allowing religions to be present and active in the "very soul of the nation." He added that such dialogues could discover the richness of each other's search for, and hopefully discovery of, God and bring the depth of that insight and revelation on the table of the pluralistic public debate in order to see what "we can do together to improve society, to assist it in its growth towards the total development of the human person, and to assure that the universal rights of the human person are safeguarded."

One of the great challenges, Cardinal Tauran has pointed out, is to bring this positive development closer to the grass root level. In this regard, he underscored the need to monitor books used in the schools on how they deal with different religions. Very often, he said that at least in some parts of the world, school books portray religions in a

bad light, misrepresenting their beliefs.

Apostolic Nuncio (Ambassador of Holy See) to Bangladesh, Most Reverend Joseph Marino, has equally praised the existing state of communal harmony in Bangladesh. He stated: "Indeed, one of the great joys that I have had since arriving

nation."

The religious face of the world is changing. At a dramatic pace, more and more regions of the world are becoming environments of multi-culture and multi-faith. At the root of this phenomenon are international patterns of immigration. The worldwide movement of peoples

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here has been the opportunity to visit many parts of Bangladesh. Each time, without exception, an inter-religious meeting composed of local Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and when possible Buddhist, leaders was always a part of the programme."

He further added: "We are all aware that the great feasts of the major religions present in Bangladesh are celebrated on a national level as public holidays. So often there are mutual celebrations of the holiday, usually attested to by the highest civil authorities of the

and cultures has facilitated a meeting of followers of various religions.

Islam encourages dialogue to reach the truth. In recent times, Muslim theologians have advocated inter-faith dialogue on a large scale.

Interfaith dialogue refers to cooperative and positive interaction between people of different religious traditions, at both the individual and institutional levels, with the aim of deriving a common ground in belief through a concentration on similarities between faiths, understanding of values, and commitment to the world.

Interfaith dialogue may include:

- How different faiths can live harmoniously together;
- To build understanding, good will and a sense of community between people of different faiths;
- To explore and learn about each other's traditions of faith;
- To share religious knowledge and insights with each other;
- To work together to achieve common goals, peace and harmony;
- To support each other in times of difficulty.

History records many examples of interfaith initiatives and dialogue throughout the ages. Emperor Akbar the Great, for example, encouraged tolerance in Mughal India, a diverse nation with people of various faiths, including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Christianity. Muslim Spain is an additional historical example of great religious pluralism and harmony.

In July 2008, a historic interfaith conference was initiated by King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to solve world problems through concord instead of conflict. The conference was attended by religious leaders of different faiths like Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism etc.

In 2010, the king of Saudi Arabia, in an address to the UN General Assembly, proposed a "World

Interfaith Harmony Week" to further broaden his goals of faith-driven world harmony by extending his call to people of all beliefs and even to those with no set religious beliefs.

We live in a conflict-torn world, characterised by hatred, discrimination and violence. Merely asking three fundamental questions -- Who am I? From where did I come? Where I shall go when I die? -- may lead to realisation of the impermanence of human life and the belief that beneath the surface differences different religions and human beings are all the same, and that they can believe in each other and can work together toward global peace, harmony and unity.

Finally, I quote from Tagore who, from his deathbed, dictated an enigmatic verse on human existence:

"When existence first became manifest the first day's sun asked, 'Who are you?' No answer. Years passed. The last day's sun put its last question in the hush of evening on the western ocean shore, 'Who are you?' and got no answer."

The writer is a former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

The west's record of depleted uranium use

PETER CUSTERS

THE pattern of deception to gain legitimacy for war in the eyes of the public is familiar by now. In the middle of March, Western powers led by the US, Great Britain and France initiated actions of war against Gaddafi's government. The war was preceded by a publicity offensive in which the Libyan leader was depicted as a madman. It was defended on the grounds that the Libyan people needed to be protected from their dictator via a "no-fly" zone, and the public was made to believe that the West aimed exclusively at defending the humanitarian interest of Libya's population. Now, the concern of the Western public over Libyan events has lessened.

The need to camouflage war aims has concomitantly decreased. According to latest reports, Nato war planes have bombarded the headquarters and residence of Muammar Gaddafi, an act which brazenly contradicts statements that the West does not intend to overthrow the Libyan leader. Also, a war council was held in Washington, where top American and British officials, including Pentagon chief Robert Gates, discussed an intensification of aerial bombardments against Tripoli.

It is time to highlight some of the long-term implications of the Western intervention. A difficult test-case is the West's use of depleted uranium weapons. Though US and British officials have denied their employment in Libya from the very start of the intervention to overthrow Gaddafi, speculation has been rife that ammunition used by the US and Nato contain "depleted" uranium. What to make of these stories?

First, the record on previous uses of so-called depleted uranium weapons is unequivocal. While the very word "depleted," or impoverished, appears to indicate that arms containing this type of uranium are not very dangerous, depleted uranium well exemplifies the intractable nature of nuclear production. The radioactivity spread by these weap-

ons is not just long-lasting, it is perennial in a literal sense: it is said that it could last for nearly as long as planet earth exists -- some 4.5 billion years!

Yet, for two reasons, the US and European states have historically opted to build weapons with everlasting radiating effects. Depleted uranium, largely consisting of uranium-238, is a very hardy metal. Hence, it can be employed to strengthen military vehicles and arms. Also, arms containing "depleted" uranium can easily pierce the armament systems of any less powerfully equipped enemy.

Thus, the Iraqi army, during the war against Iraq's occupation of Kuwait in 1991, was taken by surprise. Suddenly, US tanks fired shells, later identified as depleted

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uranium shells, having a 1,000 meter longer range than theirs, and hitting their own tanks with extraordinary speed.

Again, there is ample evidence confirming that the US war planes in the Gulf war and in the war against former Yugoslavia in the late 1990s fired similar armour-piercing shells. A whole range of Western tanks and military planes have meanwhile been equipped with shells and bombs containing depleted uranium.

But how damaging is the use of depleted uranium in war? Emerging as a by-product of the process of nuclear enrichment, massive quantities of depleted uranium used to be put aside as waste. Their new use, therefore, might appear to be an appropriate answer to the disposal of waste. The deleterious impact of materials containing a relatively "low" dose of radioactivity, as uranium-238 has, have been exposed for decades -- well before they were used in Western weaponry. Best documented have been the

consequences for Iraq, where depleted uranium weapons fitted in American tanks shells and bombs were used in the 1991 Gulf war, and also in the occupation war started in 2003. Two French journalistic accounts published gave detailed descriptions of the effects suffered by Iraq's civilian population after the Gulf war.

The extensive field-investigation carried out by the priest Jean-Marie Benjamin revealed that there had been a 350% increase in the rate of malformations in Iraqi babies at birth, such as dislocations of brains outside the head and of eyes unusually wide apart. Again, there have been reports that the number of Iraqi children with blood cancer has multiplied.

Academic reports, e.g. by the

conservative American Rand Corporation, have spoken of similar risk to the lungs and digestive systems of civilians and combatants alike. Radioactive dust may be inhaled after explosion of depleted uranium shells, or people may get radiated after contact with unexploded shells in war zones. Toxic effects from depleted uranium weapons, such as on human mutations, have been recorded too.

Third, the danger of the use of depleted uranium weapons by Western powers has been put on record by a variety of sources. The use has also been de-legitimised, thanks notably to sustained campaigning by anti-war coalitions over the past decade. Western observers analysing the US's and Nato's war strategies admitted long ago that depleted uranium weapons did not differentiate between military and civilian targets.

As long as such weapons are used, damaging impacts on civilian populations cannot be averted. Hence, in recent years, international pressure has mounted to

force the US and other Western powers which have incorporated this uranium into their armoury to stop using it. Significantly, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted three resolutions expressing its concerns over the given weaponry.

In the third resolution, adopted towards the end of 2010, no less than 148 UN member states demanded from states employing depleted uranium weapons that they frankly "reveal their use" whenever asked to do so by affected countries. Perhaps not surprisingly, four UN members voted against -- the US, Great Britain, France and Israel. The three countries now waging war against Libya, plus Israel, stood opposed to an overwhelming majority of states expressing humanity's growing anxiety.

Since the start of the war against Gaddafi, speculation by critics has primarily focused on the potential inclusion of depleted uranium in two types of weapons; as warhead or armour enhancing material in cruise missiles; and as part of the shells used by A-10 military planes. In view of the past, inclusion in the shells fired by the A-10 Thunderbolt is more than likely.

Further, documentation distributed by Nato still insist that the contamination risks from depleted uranium for populations in war theatres are negligible. And although Western officials routinely deny that they used depleted uranium in the war on Libya, they did not exclude the possibility either.

There are ample reasons to suspect that the denials are a war tactic, as was the initial denial stating that Western powers were not aiming to bring down Gaddafi's government. US and UK war chiefs have been plotting an extension of their aerial bombardments. The fear is justified that the Libyan civilian population will face long-lasting radiation effects from depleted uranium weapons used on their territory.

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Six best royal wedding jokes



THE UK's Royal Wedding was so romantic. Now comes the tough stuff. Kate Middleton (now "Mrs. Bill Windsor") will have round-the-clock lessons in the duties of a queen-to-be.

- 1) How to sit on a throne; 2) How to wave in a regal manner; 3) How to speak like a queen ("We are not amused" and "Off with his head"); etc.

Some readers were feeling cynical about the whole love thing. "Ninety percent of love is an illusion," said Christian Fardel. Jason Sydun (Sej) reckoned the figure should be 100%. Chan Kin said love was nothing more than an internal "collision between a neurotrophin and oxytocin."

Rajiv Das believed in love, saying: "Love is when you are at the night club and you desperately want her phone number. Lust is when you desperately want anyone's phone number. Love is when you would die for her. Lust is when you'd buy lunch for her, if the restaurant is affordable."

Despite the fact that this columnist's invitation to William and Catherine's nuptials inexplicably got lost in the post, I'll join the fun by offering six royal wedding jokes.

- 1) An Asian kid watching the royal wedding on TV asks: "Why is the bride wearing a white dress?" Mommy explains: "In western culture, white is the colour of purity and happiness." The kid nods. "Right, so is that why the guy is wearing black?"
- 2) Having played many pranks on his three best friends, Will expected them to

take revenge at his wedding. Early on the day, he got his guards to check Westminster Abbey and the wedding carriages. Nothing strange! At the party, he cut into the cake carefully. Nothing odd. That evening, he opened the door of their honeymoon suite carefully. No booby traps. So Will relaxes and enjoys a wild wedding night with Kate. The next morning, he phones room service. "Please send up a full English breakfast for two," he says. A voice floats up from under the bed. "Make that five."

3) Kate: "I want lots of children, boys that look like you and girls that look like me!" Will: "Actually, dear, I want just one child, a son, which I can raise properly to be the next king of England." Kate: "Okay, but I hope you'll love the others as if they were your own."

4) As Kate is shopping, a saleswoman notices her huge diamond ring. Kate explains: "It's The Windsor Diamond. It comes with a horrible curse." The saleswoman asks: "What's the curse?" Kate says: "Windsor."

5) Kate: "Now we're married, I bet you're glad your mom will have to stop poking you at weddings and saying: 'So, when's it going to be your turn?'" Will: "Actually, she stopped poking her at funerals and saying: 'So, when's it going to be your turn?'"

6) A month after the wedding, Will notices that the love has gone out of Kate's eyes. Will says: "Tell the truth, Kate. You only married me because my mother is going to leave me a massive fortune." Kate replies: "Don't be silly, Willy. I'd have married you whoever left you a massive fortune."

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