

Kudos to Dr. Alam

Breaking genetic code of jute harming fungus

IN a little more than two years, Dr. Maqsudul Alam has had his second major breakthrough. This time round, the decoding of the genome of the *macrophomina paseolina*, the killer fungus responsible for causing a loss of a third of total yield of jute annually in the country that has a market value of Tk4,000cr. We congratulate Dr. Alam and his team for this major achievement. Now scientists will be in a position to develop new varieties of jute better resistant to the fungus attack. Apart from decimating jute crop where Bangladesh is the second largest producer and exporter globally, *macrophomina paseolina* is also responsible for causing varying levels of damage to 500 other crop and non-crop species.

Needless to say, being able to develop new varieties of jute that are resistant to the fungus is a phenomenal achievement. As current species of jute require significant quantities of water to putrefy, new varieties could potentially be developed that will enable the jute to be rotted in less water. Indeed, developing fungus-resistant varieties of wheat, soybean, papaya and many other crops is now a distinct possibility enabling greater yields. The implication of developing such improved varieties of jute and other crops is that the country has the potential to earn more foreign exchange from export of jute while helping ensure food security for its growing population.

Bangladesh is in the process of getting patents for both jute genome and fungus genome sequencing. Once these are accomplished, the country can earn significant royalty when they are used globally. The importance of patenting cannot be underestimated as India alone earns US\$2 billion in annual royalty from such patents. The recent discoveries have opened up Bangladesh's potential entry into the elite world agriculture research and development (R&D) and given proper government patronage, the infrastructure necessary for a new breed of scientists could develop in the near future.

Students of private universities lock horns

Vandalism breaking new ground!

ONE would have thought that crowded public universities are places where violence and vandalism are usual occurrences at the slightest of provocations. Private universities were perceived to be largely immune to such brawls. Quite clearly, educational institutions in the public sector are not the sole claimant to displays of musclemanship. Even though private universities are not yet into political feuding and fisticuffing, yet occasionally their students might come to blows entirely out of the blue, driven by extremely petty causes.

The case in point is the clash between the students of Bangladesh University campus-2 and People's University. Disturbance broke out when students of the two private universities clashed over a car parking incident. They not only vandalised each other's institutions but also engaged in chases and counter chases resulting in traffic tailback in the busy Asad Gate area.

Often we get to see frayed tempers and scuffles after an initial altercation and nobody around would ever intervene to bring peace. People seem to amuse themselves with any untoward incident and even take sides. Basically, the police whose responsibility it is to control crowds through persuasion, disengaging the parties in a conflict they choose the convenient role of bystander. The police would have to be adequately trained in mob control methods.

Essentially though, civic sense would have to be instilled into the minds of the citizens, not through exhortations but by sensitising them about the evil consequences of individuals taking law into their own hands. This should be systematically done at the family, community, ward and above all institutional levels.

Respect for law and discipline cannot be imposed from the top; it has to come from within the society. For such a culture to grow, people from the top will have to set examples of disciplined behaviour.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

September 21

1217 Livonian Crusade: The Estonian tribal leader Lembitu and Livonian leader Kaupo are killed in Battle of St. Matthew's Day.

1338 Hundred Years' War: The Battle of Arnhemuiden was the first naval battle in history involving artillery.

1792 The National Convention declares France a republic and abolishes the monarchy.

1972 Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos signs Proclamation 1081, placing the entire country under martial law.

1991 Armenia is granted independence from Soviet Union.

1993 Russian President Boris Yeltsin suspends parliament and scraps the then-functioning constitution, thus triggering the Russian constitutional crisis of 1993.

CROSS TALK

Movie mocking Muslims



MOHAMMAD BADRUL AHSAN

IT must be the haunting spirit of Osama bin Laden lingering inside Sam Bacile, which orchestrated yet another round of hit-and-run strike. Laden had sent air-planes to strike down the Twin Towers and mow down a corner of the Pentagon. Bacile followed that example in blind imitation. He made a tasteless movie to attack the Twin Towers of Muslim sentiments: their faith and their Prophet, leaving a corner of their pride badly mauled.

Laden and Bacile have a world in common where the hubris of faith leads to nothing but the horrors of death and destruction. Both men went on the run after hitting their targets. Laden spent the rest of his life hiding in the cavernous mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan, hunted down in his hideout in a Pakistani military town. Bacile also went into hiding fearing reprisal attacks. The clip of *The Innocence of Muslims* he posted on the Internet incited frenzied mobs in a number of Muslim countries.

The difference, however, is that Sam Bacile is also hiding from himself. His name is not his name but a pseudonym. It's a cowardly front for a man, who committed a dastardly act of bigotry bringing much anguish to the devout Muslims. The

Muslim countries are still seething with anger. So much for the misguided stupidity of one madman!

The difference was also there when Osama bin Laden attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. For him, the most powerful country was the incarnation of evil on earth, and it was the target of his zealous spite. Laden was a religious zealot with a secular agenda. He was against the highhanded political meddling of his enemy in world affairs, not against its devotion to faith.

In comparison Sam Bacile, a

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fraudster and a pornographer, is an imbecile, who hit the Muslims below their belt. He and his financiers failed to realise that one scandalous movie couldn't even put a scratch on the rock-hard faith of Muslims, if not make it stronger. If the movie is targeted at the Muslims of the world, Bacile has miserably failed. The outrage in Muslim countries is a resounding proof that it has backfired on him.

Nobel-winning Portuguese writer Jose Saramago argues in one of his celebrated works that blindness is a private matter between a person and the eyes with which he or she

cost the world many times more in collateral damage.

Last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered a powerful speech on religion. She was addressing a reception organised by young Muslims who work for the State Department. "I so strongly believe that the great religions of the world are stronger than any insults. They have withstood offense for centuries," she said.

Clinton cannot be blamed for the actions of another government of her country at another time. But if the same wisdom she preached were practised by the Bush administra-

Save a life, save all humanity

violent acts can never be justified as an acceptable reaction to insults, misunderstanding, or denigration of one's faith. She expressed her strong belief that great religions are stronger than any insults. Refraining from violence is not a sign of weakness in one's faith but proof that one's faith is unshakeable. She warned that one cannot respond to offensive speech with violence without begetting more violence.

Can we really achieve a lasting peace and understanding between the US and the Muslim world as Secretary Clinton hopes? Or are we destined to face the "clash of civilisations" as suggested by the American theorist Samuel Huntington?

For me, the "clash of civilisations" theory fails to hold water since, on a fundamental level, there are no two

wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the unrest in the Middle East and North Africa. To add fuel to this fire of blame and hatred extremists often exploit the ignorance of others to perpetuate a distorted view that the US is against Islam. For instance, they argue that the US advocates and supports the burning of the Holy Qu'ran and the production of materials which are aimed to insult Islam and Muslims. The discourse of hatred takes away the space from the truly educated and enlightened Muslim voices of reason, rationality, and humanity. It is the failure of the majority Muslim believers to speak out that leads to a perpetuation of a distorted reality about the US in the minds of many. This obviously has adverse consequences for both the US and the Muslim communities and feeds the

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distinct civilisations. The Muslim world is not monolithic but comprised of a billion Muslims with different ethnicities, languages, cultures, and mores. Similarly, there is no one entity or nation which can be called the "West." In light of the global power and political hegemony of the US, it is often viewed as the embodiment of Western civilisation. In fact, even within the US there exists a wide range of religions, cultures, races, and views. The reality of this diversity on both sides, however, gets submerged by the voices of extremism, which in fact is a small minority. It is these voices of intolerance and hatred that hijack the debate.

Muslim extremists often find it convenient to blame America for all their troubles. They blame the US for the plight of the Palestinians, the

notion of a "clash of civilisations."

On the other side, in the US as well there exists a small group of ignorant bigoted extremists who believe that Muslims are all polygamous wife-beating terrorists who spend their days plotting attacks on the US. They abuse their constitutional right of free speech to burn copies of the Holy Qu'ran, obstruct building of mosques, and encourage reprehensible material insulting Islam. Again, this extremist narrative somehow gets amplified in the media and negates the voices of the overwhelming majority of Americans.

Muslim communities all over the world should not be held responsible for the insane acts of al-Qaeda and the tragic events of 9/11, in the same way Muslims should not hold the US responsible for insensitive

tion, it would have shown restraint after 9/11. Instead, it behaved like an unruly mob and thrashed the maid to teach the wife. Bush hit Saddam Hussein while going after Laden, although till today nobody has seen a connection between these two men. Invasion of Iraq will go down in history as the loudest slap in the face of this civilisation.

The US secretary also said that the United States is powerless to act against those who incited the violence. Sam Bacile and his buddies are protected by the freedoms enshrined in the American constitution. Hopefully, the future governments of her country will show similar understanding, if rogue states or fundamentalist regimes enshrine disturbing principles in their constitutions and carry on with their atrocities.

The latest news is that a French magazine has decided to join the fray by printing caricature of the Prophet of Islam. Zealotry is when blindness creates madness and the other way around. Which comes first between the madmen who are blind and the blind men who are mad?

The West must convince us how their blind pursuit of the freedom of expression is superior to the mad pursuit of dogmatic zealots, who believe they are killing and dying for the expression of freedom, if the end result is violence and bloodshed.

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acts of individual US citizens. It is plainly wrong to judge the US as a nation by the acts of a few aberrant and deviant citizens.

Having lived in the US for almost two years, and having had the privilege of interacting on a daily basis with other Muslims from countries as diverse as Egypt, Turkey, Yemen, Jordan, and Sri Lanka -- I now know that the perception of Muslims all over the world about the American society is also largely distorted. In reality, the American society is largely tolerant towards all religions including Islam. There are over a thousand mosques in the country where American Muslims go for their daily prayers. The Obama administration has been strongly supportive of building bridges with Muslim communities around the globe to bring about a positive change in relations based on mutual respect and understanding.

In a similar vein, the true voice of Islam is also that of tolerance, peace, and humanity. Nowhere in the Holy Qu'ran is the murder and killing of innocent people justified. On the contrary, Surah Al-Maidah Chapter 5, Verse 32 explains that if you kill a person, it is as though you kill all humanity -- save one life, it is as though you save all humanity. Muslims believers need to keep in mind that the Qu'ran affirms that the truth of Islam shall prevail and cannot be diminished by insults and denigrations. Surah Al-Isra Chapter 17 Verse 81 clearly states: "Truth has come, and falsehood has departed. Indeed is falsehood, by nature, ever bound to depart."

Without in any way trying to justify the intolerable and deeply offensive movie that has caused so much outrage, we must also renounce the violent protests and the taking of innocent lives. The US and the Muslim communities need to reinforce their bonds and build bridges of trust and mutual respect since there is no alternative to peaceful co-existence. We cannot surrender to the extremists on both sides.

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The writer is a lawyer.