

SEPTEMBER 11: SOME REFLECTION

THE NEWS

27 September 2002

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As I switched on the CNN at around 1800 hrs (Pakistan Time), the screen was clouded by smoke and the South Tower was crumbling. "War on America" was the cry behind the falling debris.

My initial reaction was shock, which soon turned into deep grief, anguish and sympathy for the innocent victims of this outrage and for the people of America who were rightly overwhelmed by sorrow and indignation.

As the news of the tragic episode rolled by, I forgot, like millions of Muslims the world over, all my complaints and grievances against America. I felt the pain of those who had suffered and the loss of their near and dear ones.

An hour later I switched over to BBC-24 and had a second shock. Israel's former Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, was, live on TV, alleging Islamic fundamentalists and naming Osama bin Laden for this horrifying crime, which was universally condemned by Muslim leadership and Islamic scholars.

How come he could have discovered the hand behind the crime so fast, while the American president was still seeking refuge in the air and the vice-president in the basements of the White House? I was intrigued and was apprehensive of a new war against Islam and the Muslims. And alas, that is what 9/11 has continually unfolded.

The number of victims shrank from 7,000 to 2,819 but the war hysteria has been spread to all corners of the world. Numbers are important, but not that much. Even one person, as Islam teaches us, is as important as the entire humanity. Those killed in that wanton act belonged to all faiths and came from over 80 countries of the world. According to one estimate, one in every four was a Muslim. Yet, Islam and the Muslims were targeted and demonized. Even Salman Hamdani, a Pakistani youth of 23, who rushed from outside to the burning tower to save human lives and was consumed in the flames of fire, was not remembered.

The next shock came from President Bush's new dictum: "whoever is not with us is with the terrorists". A president who was not elected by a majority of the American people (Al Gore was leading by half a million votes), who was inducted into the White House with Florida's dubious votes and the divided verdict of the Supreme Court, unleashed a crusade against other peoples of the world, terrorizing governments into falling in line with the so-called coalition against terror by threatening their leaderships to be ready to be sent back to the stone age in case they did not prepare themselves to cooperate in action against innocent people in other parts of the world without establishing their guilt.

The American justice department did not care a dime while detaining over two thousand people who lived in America under the protection of the American constitution, denying them all legal and moral rights as members of a civilized society. Even white Americans were turned into 'non-war combatants' and the prisoners of war were denied all rights due to them under Geneva Convention.

An era of American arrogance, and unilateralism was inaugurated, claiming exclusive rights and privilege for the Americans, particularly its armed forces, and America's self-assumed right to military intervention wherever it chooses, and to remain above all the accepted norms of human behavior, international law and Geneva Protocols - all in the name of fighting terrorism.

Terrorism has no religion. Timothy McVeigh or Osama bin Laden represent a class of their own who are prepared to inflict violence on others to pursue their own political causes or highlight their grievances.

Terrorism didn't begin on 9/11 and would not end with that. It is a tactic and a stratagem. The use of force has many names and forms. It could be legitimate or illegitimate. It is only on the basis of conformity with values and principles that one can be differentiated from the other. Violence is something different. It relates to that aspect of human behavior wherein individuals or groups (including governments) inflict injury, death or destruction on others for personal or ulterior motives, and as such they stand guilty of crime against persons or humanity. Violence is motivated by personal considerations.

Terrorism is different from both. Although there is no universally accepted definition of terrorism, an overwhelming body of legal and political opinion looks on terrorism in the context, not of personal gain or vendetta, but some political or social objectives. The purpose is to shock, to strike fear and pain in order to highlight some grievances or cause. While ends cannot justify means, it would be unrealistic not to differentiate between terrorism that represent wanton violence and apparent terrorism which is a product of political or social affliction.

Apparently American fury is directed against all and sundry on the plea that (a) the act took place on American soil and that (b) it led to the death of some three thousand people. Without, in any way, diminishing the horror and despicability of the event, American duplicity cannot be ignored either. America has been responsible for acts of terrorism both at home and abroad.

The sympathy for America was the first genuine reaction of 9/11 but during the year following it, these feelings have been its hapless victim. American unilateralism and brinkmanship have produced widespread disappointment, discord, rage and hatred. Equality of all human beings has been changed into eternal superiority of the Americans. Due process of law has been discarded in favour of arbitrary detention, denial of right to defence and defence through lawyers of one's choice. Punishment no longer requires proof and judicially acceptable evidence. Even the right to privacy is in danger.

The sovereignty of other nations is becoming irrelevant as far as the outreach of the only superpower is concerned. The United Nations and the values on which its Charter is based have been marginalized. Like the Roman Empire, the right of intervention is being claimed, including the right to impose political leadership of America's choice on different countries.

On 9/11 we all were sharing the pain of the American people. But the initial response could not last long, despite the flirtations to and by some of the leaders of the Muslim world. American leadership chose to unleash an undefined and indefinable war against ever-changing targets: Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Taliban, Muslim fundamentalists, religious educational institutions, Afghanistan, Iraq, 'axis of evil', 'kernel of evil', 'political suspects', 'non-war combatants', so on and so forth. This is forcing the people to ask as to who are the real beneficiaries of the 'veritable hell' of 9/11 - 'Muslims in America and all over the world' of the 'vested interests in politics, economy and military' in America, Israel and India.

We share the Americans' pain. In fact, we are all at the suffering end. Beneficiaries are a different class: America's conservative political leadership and its military-industrial establishment; Ariel Sharon and the Israeli forces of occupation in Palestine; Vajpayee and Advani who are using the same terrorizing weapons in Kashmir and elsewhere, to name but a few beneficiaries.

Muslim and Arab leaderships are being coaxed into submission. European and East Asian nations are being enticed and pressured. A process of global destabilization has begun, threatening all values and principles that represent the achievement of mankind over many centuries. People are bewildered on the way President Bush and his colleagues are treating the rest of the world. They are asking searching questions. Their minds cannot be shut, despite all the smoke-screen of propaganda.
