

WHO WILL HELP
THE BOSNIAN MUSLIMS?

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ON DECEMBER 27, 1993 Pakistan joined brotherly OIC countries to observe a Day of Solidarity with the people of Bosnia Herzegovina, who are undergoing unprecedented barbaric killings by Serbs in the name of ethnic cleansing. At least two and a half million Bosnians have been forcibly driven out of their homes. Metal cages, concentration camps and detention centres remind the world of Hitler's crimes against humanity. Bosnian women have been gangraped, their houses burnt and cities destroyed.

What is the real conflict and why is the West not prepared to allow a tiny Muslim state in the heart of Europe? History tells us the story.

Bosnia is not a new state in Europe. Neither is the ordeal a new phenomenon. There had been other Muslim states in Europe which flourished for five centuries. One of these is Balkan, which underwent ordeal three times. First, in the second half of the 19th century when the Ottoman Empire was disintegrating and the European nations were trying to hunt it like vultures and grab its different parts. Second, before the World War I, in the 1878 Treaty of Berlin, Bosnia was handed over to Austro-Hungaria; over a quarter of a million people were wiped out at that time. Third, during the World War II, when the Allies were fighting the Nazis and there was a massacre of Muslims by Serbs.

Prof Arnold in *The Preaching of Islam* says that Islam reached

Hungary and the region of Balkan in the 12th century. For about 100-150 years there were some 30 villages and towns of Muslim population. This continued till the first quarter of the 14th century when the Hungarian state pursued the same policy of exterminating Muslims which was pursued in Spain, i.e., if you become Muslim, get killed; or leave the country.

For about three centuries Muslims contributed greatly in the fields of art and literature, architecture, science and technology, education or the reorganisation of the society. Development of towns and cities took place in accordance with the Islamic traditions. Some nine grand ministers had come from this part which is known as Bosnia and there was a very successful tradition of independent Muslim rule and state in Bosnia. With the weakening of the Ottomans in mid 18th century, some kind of Bosnian autonomy was established until the last quarter of the 19th century when there came a period of Serbian hegemony.

It is unfortunate that before the Bosnian crisis, there was no mention of Muslim states in Europe. Albania is one of such states where 75 percent of the population is Muslim. Kosovo, which was an autonomous region of Yugoslavia but still under Serbian control, has 92 percent Muslim population.

WITH THE disintegration of Yugoslavia, it was very clear

that the new Muslim state of Bosnia-Herzegovina would have 45-46 percent Muslims, 30-32 percent Serbs and 13-17 percent Croats. Serbs for several decades had planned that they would never allow a state which had even the potential of becoming a Muslim state. Bosnians Muslims, conscious that they constitute only 45-46 percent of the population, never claimed that they were heading toward establishing an Islamic state. Contrary to this, in fact, a process of de-Islamisation or secularisation of the Muslims of Yugoslavia had been in operation for over a century. This also included their physical extermination. During Marshal Tito's communist regime, Muslims were the worst sufferers.

During this period, there was a government-sponsored policy to destroy Muslim traditions and institutions. Men belonging to religious groups were tried and executed. Dozens of Ulema were sentenced to death. Religious institutions were closed. It was only in the 1980's that some measure of freedom was given to the Muslims. Mr Izetbegovic, the Bosnian President, had been in prison for over 10 years. He wrote the Islamic Declaration in 1970 and was persecuted for that. Although the declaration related to the entire Islamic Ummah and there was not a word in it about Bosnia-Herzegovina, yet he was put behind bars. Muslims were being secularised and persecuted. Their language, which was originally written like Turkish in Arabic script, underwent the same process in the early 20th century

as Muslims had suffered in Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia, East Africa and even in West Africa. There was cultural onslaught everywhere: change of the language, its script; secularisation of everything; of education, of way of life, of polity, of lifestyle, of laws, of institutions.

Despite the cultural onslaught, the Muslim resistance didn't die. It was in this context that Serbians made it a target that a Muslim state would not be allowed to come into existence. Today, they propagate that they are fighting to protect Europe from Islam and the danger of the emergence of a Muslim state in the European heartland. There are over a dozen references from top Serb intellectuals, policy-makers and heads of Serbian and Croatian states where they have said that "birth rate among Muslims is very high and there is a Muslim urge for Islam and we fear that this is how in the heart of Europe, a Muslim state will come into existence". This is the Islamic card they are trying to use.

Bosnians had been extremely cautious and lived in peace with other neighbours both in the past when Muslim Turks ruled and also in today's world. They lived shoulder to shoulder with complete religious and cultural freedom. *Time* weekly says: "Intercommunal harmony in Bosnia where Serbs, Croats and Muslims lived together for 45 years is close to a model of tolerance and pluralism. What ruined it was the arrival on the scene of an essentially external force — Greater Serbian imperialism, armed and sponsored by Bel-

grade. That is why there must now be a decisively more powerful external force: one that goes far beyond the UN's current peacekeeping mission".

Ploy of 'fundamentalism'

It is evident that the alleged factor of Islamic fundamentalism and Islamic state is a propaganda ploy. While Muslims do have a right to order their social, cultural, individual and political life according to their own beliefs and preferences without use of force, Bosnian are using it as a tool.

Bosnians are basically Europeans. There is no ethnic difference between the Bosnian Muslims or the Balkan Serbs. All of them are from the same Slav origin. They have the same blood running through their veins. Their colour is similar: they have the same pale face and blue eyes. But the difference comes when Serbs identify themselves with the Orthodox Christian Church. Ironically the Church still has its headquarter in Istanbul. Present-day Russians also belong to the same Church and that is why sanctions against Serbia do not exist in reality. They exist only on paper or in UN resolutions. Croats on the other hand embraced Roman Catholicism and they have the support of Germans. Despite their similarity on ethnic grounds, Muslims are not accepted as their part, not because they are Bosnians but because they are Muslims, or, as Serbians allege, Turks. Nothing could be far from the truth.

Bosnia is not a question of ethnic cleansing; the war is against Islam and Muslims. The tragic episode has made the Bosnian Muslims conscious: they know now that they are being persecut-

ed and eliminated only for being Muslims. It has opened the eyes of even those who are secular; those who never prayed or even do not know how to pray. This has made them realise that as long as they identify themselves with Islam, even though they drink, eat pork, adopt a lifestyle very similar to the lifestyle of other Europeans, they are not acceptable, by others.

The first international conference of the Muslim World to express solidarity with the suffering Bosnian Muslims, held in Zagreb in September 1992, gave me an opportunity to spend four days with the Bosnian Muslims and discuss the issue both at the government and peoples level. I met Bosnian President Dr Alija Izetbegovic on my return. I had been in touch with Mr Izetbegovic for the last 20 years and this long association enabled us to discuss things in a spirit of confidence and understanding.

I met hundreds of such people in Croatia and Bosnia who, with tears in their eyes, say: "Yes, we are suffering, but we deserve it. This has opened our eyes. The war has made us conscious that our identity is Islam. And our road to survival lies only in Islam. Previously, we had left everything Islamic and yet we were not safe and accepted.

Dr Mustafa Shalic says it beautifully: I studied at Chicago and Al-Azhar. I had been leading prayers in Zagreb for 20 years and I deliberately avoided reciting Quranic verses dealing with Jihad, for we thought this might be regarded as confrontation by non-Muslims. We compromised on everything Islamic. But when the moment of truth came, we found out that no compromise, no retreat, no hidings are going to be of any help to us. And the only way for us is to face the real-

ity. Now through Jihad and suffering we are learning this lesson. The suffering is also a teacher.

There is no threat of Muslim power, political and economic, from the Muslims, yet the civilised western world, the so-called world of tolerance, is not prepared to accept the existence of even a secularised Muslim state in Europe. What is happening today in Bosnia is going to happen in Kosovo and Albania tomorrow.

BEFORE BOSNIA declared independence, the United Nations, maintaining the high traditions of international law and New World Order, imposed sanctions on the whole region.

Aggressor and victim alike?

Look at the irony: everybody says that Serbia is the aggressor. The UN reports, the European Community leadership, journalists, American satellite pictures and US Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee reports are unanimous that Serbs are the aggressor and they intend to create a Greater Serbia. Yugoslavia had the fourth largest army in Europe and 80 percent of that is in the hands of Serbia and the remaining 19 percent in the hands of Croats. Muslims do not even have one percent. The US Senate Foreign Affairs Committee was told that Serbia had 300 tanks and Bosnia one; the entire air-force helicopters and gunships are with the Serbians while Bosnia had none. At least 70 percent area of Bosnia-Herzegovina has been grabbed through brute force by Serbia and 10 percent by Croatia. Yet in the eyes of the UN the aggressor and the victim are alike. The so-called

economic sanctions or embargo on arms is for both. Channels for arms shipment are open for Serbs from Greece, Russia and other East European countries; they have excess by land, air and sea routes. On the contrary, Bosnians are landlocked.

The fact that UN charter's Article 5, clearly saying that "nothing shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a UN member until the Security council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security", is ignored and Bosnia cannot receive arms. The Bosnians are clamouring: Don't give us food, we can face starvation; give us arms to fight, to protect our honour, our families, our homes, our homeland.

Nevertheless, the Muslims of Bosnia are fighting: from city to city, town to town, village to village, and home to home. And they are fighting almost empty-handed. I met a fighting young Muslim supercomputer analyst who had never touched a dagger, a pistol or a gun. I met the fighting Imams who had always been preaching. While women, children and old age people want to stay in refugee camps all able-bodied Muslims want to fight. In Zagreb only, they number in hundreds of thousands. Their leaders were happy that Muslim volunteers were coming to join them in this fight, but emphasised at the same time. "What we need is not manpower, we need arms."

Stories of brute Serbian crimes against Bosnians in refugee camps are so compelling that it is very difficult even to hear them. And the courageous Bosnians have been through it!

The world is aware that tens of

thousands of people have been killed during this debacle. Of these, about 20,000 have been killed in mass massacres and about 17,000 in concentration camps. There were 104 concentration camps with over 250,000 Bosnian Muslims in them. The satellite pictures of these camps had been with Americans. In May 1992, the US supplied these pictures to certain Security Council members, but there was no mention of the camps. They came to light only in August when some of the German journalists were able to visit a couple of camps: the pictures were very much like those of Nazi camps.

After remaining in the camps for three to four months one can see only living skeletons, not human bodies. The Serbians have been torturing and killing people. Gangrapes are simply not describable. Villages have been uprooted. Over 1000 cultural monuments, mosques, madrasahs and museums of historical importance have been destroyed. In Sarajevo alone, the Middle East Institute which had 1.5 million books, rare manuscripts and documents, was burnt to ashes. The Islamic college having centuries-old 15,000 manuscripts was destroyed. There is no end to this sordid tale.

The real issue

UNFORTUNATELY, THE West has been completely misinterpreting the issue. There is no denying that it is a big humanitarian problem: 2.8 million people displaced, a million scattered in Croatia, Hungary, Germany, Turkey, Italy and other neighbouring countries and taking refuge in other parts of Eu-

rope and Middle East. The humanitarian aid about which there is so much western fanfare is in fact a peanut. Sarajevo's 400,000 people do not have water or electricity. Telephone system is destroyed; food and medicines are out of stock. Major surgeries are being conducted without proper instruments. But the real issue is a calculated genocide of Bosnian Muslims which is a crime under UN charter, crime for which Hitler's colleagues were tried, a crime which justifies collective use of force against perpetrators.

Where are those champions of a New World Order, who a couple of years ago were declaring that aggression and occupation by force cannot be pardoned and that force must be met by force? Where are they who claimed that violators of principles of international law would be forced to respect law?

Instead of punishing the aggressor, the West is condoning aggression and genocide. The tragedy is that even Muslims who despite their weakness had always responded to the call of agony are also sleeping. Though some individuals, Islamic organisations and to some extent countries like Pakistan, Iran and Turkey have shown some concern, it appears as if we are living in a graveyard. People forget that if these things are tolerated today we might undergo a similar experience tomorrow.

Undoubtedly, humanitarian aid is important and every effort must be made to provide it, but the real issue is Muslim genocide. And genocide cannot be met by cans of water and loaves of bread; it has to be met by force. One of the advisers to former French

Prime Minister Michelle Rocard wrote: "What we are doing is we are sending food to the people in Sarajevo so that they could be killed with filled bellies. Instead we must ensure that their lives are protected."

There is also a change of borders by force. Arbitrary use of force by Serbia, charged by a methodological Greater Serbian empire, is inciting the people to fulfil this mad dream. The sovereignty, the integrity of borders of Bosnia-Herzegovina, which has been recognised by the UN and the EC, is non-existent in reality.

Role of Muslim world

In the face of these hard realities, I suggest that the Muslim world must play its rightful role, both at the people and governmental level. If only half a dozen Muslim countries take a bold stand and say that if nothing is done under the UN charter, Muslim armies would go to Bosnia to protect rights of individuals and maintain collective defence, things would start changing. Turkey, Pakistan, Iran and Egypt have the resources. Irony is that despite resources, we lack will, vision, faith and commitment; we are not conscious of our responsibility. Muslim journalists should go to Bosnia to report to the world the genocide there.

While there are people in Europe haunted by the spectre of Islamic fundamentalism even in their sleep, there is a vast potential to mobilise world opinion in favour of the just cause of Bosnia. There's need to mobilise world opinion. The Muslim countries in particular and Third World coun-

tries in general need to be mobilised to avert Greater Serbia.

Bosnians need not only humanitarian assistance, but also arms for self-defence. The arms embargo should be lifted and Muslim countries should mobilise a joint armed force with an open invitation to every peace-loving country. The UN commission on war crimes should take decisive actions against the aggressor to avoid further bloodshed in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The article has been adapted from a presentation by the writer at an Institute of Policy Studies seminar on "Tragedy in Bosnia." The writer is a Senator.