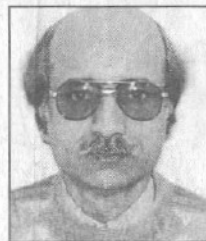


Parochialism in a glo

THINKING ALOUD



RAZI AZMI

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Wherever there is suffering, be it Somalia or Bosnia, Chechnya or Guatemala, Kosovo or Congo, Darfur or Bangladesh, Kurdistan or Afghanistan, regardless of whether the victims are Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or animist, black, brown, yellow or white, one sees Oxfam, Medics sans Frontières, Planet Aid, Project Hope, Salvation Army, Christian Aid, to name a few, rushing to ameliorate human suffering. While the charities provide humanitarian assistance, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Reporters sans Frontières, CNN and BBC, and many others based in Western countries, draw the world's attention to human misery and expose those responsible for it.

Not so the Ummah, where governments, politicians and public opinion either engage in a veritable conspiracy of silence or explode in outrage depending on the religious affiliations of the victim and the tormentor. It can be assumed that Muslims would remain indifferent when oppression is perpetrated by Muslims against non-Muslims (a matter of course in every Muslim country) or by non-Muslims against non-Muslims (as in Rwanda or Congo). But it is striking that they should remain unperturbed even when the victims are Muslims, which is the norm if the perpetrators happen to be Muslim governments. Witness the oppression of Kurds in both Iraq and Turkey, the 1991 massacre of Iraqi Shi'ites, the annexation of former Spanish Sahara by Morocco against the will of the Saharawis, and, now, the people of the Darfur region of Sudan, to mention a few.

Muslims wake up from their slumber only when there is a perception that their co-religionists are suffering from repression by non-Muslims. Having done so, they have the extraordinary ability to work themselves into a frenzy, ready to lay down their lives for the sake of their distant brothers-in-faith. Small wonder that Palestine, Chechnya, Bosnia — and, to a lesser extent, Kashmir — have become

"UNDER GROWING FOREIGN PRESSURE, Sudan's government has been saying for weeks that it is disarming the Arab militias who have driven at least a million black citizens from their homes and killed perhaps 30,000 more," a newspaper report said on July 26. Other sources put the figure at 50,000, which would mean that the number of people killed in 15 months of repression in Sudan is comparable to those killed in 15 years of violence in Kashmir.

The foreign pressure alluded to in the report comes from the US, the European Union, the African Union and the United Nations Security Council. It hardly comes as a surprise that the Ummah's response is muted although, in this case, the victims are Muslims. Pakistan, currently the only Muslim state on the UN Security Council, abstained from voting on a watered-down resolution that gives the Khartoum regime 30 days to live up to its international commitments to disarm the Janjaweed Arab militia directly responsible for the carnage.

Humanity and human rights barely figure in the Ummah's scheme of things. In certain situations it remains unmoved even when the victims are Muslims. The reason for this sorry plight of the people of Darfur and for the silence of the venerable Ummah is the unfavourable race and colour of the victims (black Africans) in relation to that of the oppressors (Arabs).

The West has a consistent record of raising its voice against oppression regardless of the religious denomination or the skin colour of either the victim or the perpetrator. Where Western governments have occasionally faltered in the past due to political or economic expediency, as in South Africa (under apartheid) and Indonesia (when the Muslim General Suharto was exterminating alleged Communists), civil society as represented by public figures, writers and journalists have spoken out and charities have done their best to help the victims where possible.

Human Rights Daily Times

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household names among Muslims the world over, sure to be mentioned in any discussion of international affairs and human rights issues, which invariably conclude in a general agreement about the "wicked designs" of the rest of the world against the world of Islam.

In all the above instances, there is a complete and utter lack of knowledge of the history, genesis, geography, scale and the international dimensions of the disputes and conflicts. All are viewed through the prism of Islamic victimhood as proofs positive about the treachery and perfidy of Christians, Jews and (from a Pakistani perspective) Hindus. Rather than thank the British for partitioning India to give us our Pakistan, we blame them for not giving us a bigger slice of India!

The total Muslim population of the above quartet of Muslim victimhood adds up to just about 13 million, about the same as that of Karachi (Kashmir 5 million, Palestine 5 million, Bosnia 2 million and Chechnya 1 million). Contrast this with the number of people killed in recent conflicts in Rwanda (800,000 in 3 months), Congo (3 million over a decade), Kurds (200,000 in 1988 in Iraq alone) and Iran-Iraq War (1 million). The total number of people killed in 15 years of conflict in Kashmir is around 50,000. The number of Palestinians dead from Israeli actions during the last few years is about three thousand (about one thousand Jews have paid for this with their lives). The worst atrocities against Muslims have been committed in Bosnia and Chechnya, but both conflicts are deeply rooted in the history and politics of the region, and these have occurred not because of the West's complicity but in spite of its opposition.

Srebrenica gained worldwide infamy in 1995 when, over a five-day period, more than 7,000 Bosnian Muslims were massacred by Christian Serbs, who got bombed by the "Christian" West for their criminal conduct. Rwanda translates into one Srebrenica per day, every day, for over

three months but it hardly rated a mention in any of the Muslim countries, then or now.

Muslim parochialism knows no bounds. It has spilled out of hearts and minds, literally onto streets, towns and treaties. While the ancient Indian city of Prayag, sacred to Hindus, continues to bear the name of Allah (Allahabad) even after Hindutva rule, we found it necessary to rename Hindubagh (a small town in Baluchistan) to Muslimbagh. We have even renamed the Red Cross, recipient of two Nobel Peace Prizes and known by this name since its inception 140 years ago, to Red Crescent. We have created the Islamic States Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (ISESCO) to compete with the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), whose benefits nevertheless continue to enjoy.

In 1990 the governments of Islamic states, which are renowned for their contempt for the human rights of their citizens, adopted the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam as if the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 was not good enough for them. There is no association of Christian, Buddhist or Hindu states, but they founded the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to announce to the world our parochialism!

It is a dreadful thought, but if the rest of the world began to organise itself on the basis of religion, as we have, and to be possessed by half the ignorant parochialism, hatred and militancy that characterises the result would be a fast-forward to Armageddon. The whole world would resemble Rwanda, Chechnya, Bosnia or Sudan, with no-one left to stop the bloodbath to attend to the victims.

The author, a former academic with a doctorate in modern history, is now a freelance writer and columnist.