OIC: a platform for cooperation

The Muslim world will never be able to improve the fate of its people unless the decision-makers realize the importance of upgrading the status of science and technology

BY MAMOONA AMJED

TODAY when the world has entered the third millennium, an era marked by advances in science and technology, it is unfortunate that one billion Muslims constituting one fifth of the world population, contribute well below five per cent of the scientific knowledge. Despite lagging behind the rest of the world in terms of technologies, the Muslim countries still invest less than 0.2 per cent of their GDP in science and technology, which is less than what the individual European countries like France and Germany spend on these fields.

Between the 7th and 17th centuries AD, the Muslims held the banner of civilization, and the torch of knowledge, scholasticism and learning. Europe was, at that time, passing through the dark and middle ages (500-1100 and 1100-1546 Ad).

Between the 14th and the 16th centuries Ad, Europe woke up and started competing with the Islamic scientific knowledge. Although the influence of Arab culture is traceable in many aspects of European culture, the most momentous contribution of Arab civilization to modern world is in the field of science. Nevertheless, the Islamic civilization started to be the target for a series of successive waves of attacks by different quarters, resulting in devastation of the well established centres of education and learning.

These successive waves of devastation, which were [illegible] the Islamic papers published in 13 Islamic countries with a population of 8,000 million.

This shows one of the most depressing pictures of our present-day world, which is currently visible in the form of digital divide that exists between the Muslim countries and the West.

Today, the industrial countries (consisting of a very small portion of the world population) own most of the wealth of the world. These countries are trying to dominate the rest of the world through their economic power, scientific and technological superiority, as well as, through their military might. The rest of the world has been reduced to the status of consumers of goods and services provided by the West. Thus in the process, the wealth of the developing countries is being continuously transferred to the industrially advanced countries, widening the gap between the two worlds.

The present situation of the Muslim nations is mainly because of their dependence on the West, resulting, mainly, from their backwardness in science and technology and due to a lack of strong commitment, on part of their political leaders, to this aspect.

The solution to many of the problems faced by the Muslim world today is the adoption of a major national commitment of governments of the Muslim tion programme. The Deng Xiaoping government declared in 1979 that China intended to quadruple its GNP and emulate the West in science and technology by the end of the 20th century.

The hostile global political environment and the deteriorating state of affairs of the Muslim Ummah calls upon the Muslims to wake up to the realities of modern world.

The Muslim countries should use a common platform to make focused efforts to enhance the indigenous capabilities of the OIC countries and to enhance the collective strength of Ummah. Technological research today needs modern equipment, facilities, infrastructure, certain socio-economic conditions, ence in the socio-economic development of the Islamic World. The idea of setting up the fund was conceived by Dr Attaur Rahman, Coordinator-General, COMSTECH, and was presented to Pres General Pervez Musharra Chairman of the COMST in 2001, who agreed to th posal and put it before general assembly of the STECH, held in Feb 200 concept was that the would receive at least cent of the GDP, an from each member state the guarantee that a 80 per sent o donated a would be within the try con ing it, areas of ty ide by the count The c i amou be h an tion l Isla Develo Bank, will be istered council o ters of and techn the contr member stat president of and the coor general, COMS will be co-chair the council. Th gramme will be imple by COMSTECH in dance with the decisio council.

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These successive waves of devastation, which were inflicted upon the Islamic World and its glorious centres of civilization and culture, between the 13th and the 17th centuries AD, led to the gradual weakening of the Muslims and the loss of both its cultural superiority and economic prosperity. Consequently, the Muslims began to lag behind in the area of science and technology like many other areas. It was a time when the Latin West and the yellow East started to compete for the scientific and technological and material prosperity.

As an indication of the level of scientific activities in Islamic countries, we just need to compare the number of papers published in USA with that of Islamic countries. In 1997, scientists in the US alone produced 260,000 papers, as compared to the only 9,000

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The solution to many of the problems faced by the Muslim world today is the adoption of a major national commitment of governments of the Muslim countries to acquire and enhance scientific knowledge. Japan is a vivid example, a country whose government set itself such a target and succeeded. Mutsushito, emperor of the Meiji dynasty, launched the Meiji Restoration in 1869 and implemented it with devotion and commitment that led to the rapid growth of Japan as a technological power. Their Prime Minister Prince Ito said in 1886, "The only way to maintain the nation's strength and to guarantee the welfare of our people in perpetuity is through the results of science."

A more recent example of how important such national commitment can be is provided by China. In the 1980s, China set herself an ambitious target, which it hoped to fulfil through a major modernization

20th century.

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The Muslim countries should use a common platform to make focused efforts to enhance the indigenous capabilities of the OIC countries and to enhance the collective strength of Ummah. Technological research today needs modern equipment, facilities, infrastructure, certain socio-economic conditions, and above all a generous patronage by the government.

Established in 1981 at the Third Islamic Summit held in Makkah, Organization of Islamic Conference Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH), has the potential to provide the required platform for the Muslim world, through mutual co-operation.

Since its inception, the COMSTECH has launched a number of programmes for human resource development, infrastructure building of scientific institutions, and for promotion of research and development activities in the OIC countries. However, the setting up of the multi-billion-dollar Pan Islamic Research and Development fund has the potential to make a real differ-

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The principal amount will be held by an institution like the Islamic Development Bank, and it will be administered by a council of ministers of science and technology of the contributing member states. The president of the IDB and the coordinator-general, COMSTECH, will be co-chairmen of the council. The programme will be implemented by COMSTECH in accordance with the decisions of the council.

At least 80 per cent of the contribution from a member state will be used to finance research and development activity and setting up of centres of excellence within that country. Scientific activity to be financed will be in frontier technologies, such as biotechnology, information technology, pharmaceuticals, electronics, robotics, material sciences, desertification, renewable energy and other fields that have the potential to ensure rapid industrialization and increased agricultural output of the contributing states. The remaining amount will be used by COMSTECH for building collective strength in scientific programmes and management skills to create a joint strategy for resource management and development of scientific goals that will inculcate a unified approach towards solution of the problem.

Individually, most Muslim countries lack the necessary human and material resources to make any meaningful contribution to the fast changing faces of technology, which are resulting in rapid economic development of even small European countries (e.g. GDP of Austria- a country of a population of only 8 million, is US$208 billion - higher than any of the fifty seven OIC member states). However, through pooling resources together Muslim countries can muster together a sufficiently large number of scientists in every discipline.

The OIC member states need to realize that total reliance on borrowed technologies from alien cultures would impede development, advancement and transformation of Ummah.

The Muslim world will never be able to modernize or even improve the lot of its people unless the decision makers realize the importance of upgradating the status of science and technology. Pan Islamic fund is one idea to promote meaningful co-operation — there can be similar ideas, but what needs to be understood is that to change the fate of Islamic world, a concerted effort, both by the intellectuals and decision makers of the Islamic world is required.

As first step, the Muslim countries need to think together to identify the main stumbling blocks in the way to promotion of science and technology as a means of development. ■