

# Reality comes calling

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**T**here are many in our common world who suffer indignity and humiliation because they are not white. . . . of them it is said that they are human but black, whereas others are described as human and white." Even as South African President, Thabo Mbeki, articulated this bitter reality while opening the UN's Conference on Racism, its pervasiveness was being underscored in a life and death drama unfolding thousands of miles away.

Around 450 mostly Afghan migrants, or refugees, had boarded a rust-bucket from Indonesia for El Dorado, Australia. The tales of maltreatment by the Australians of the earlier arrivals had either not reached them or, more likely, were small indignities compared to the poverty and degradation which had driven them from home.

But this voyage of hope nearly turned to tragedy when their ferry broke down on the high seas. Since the Australian law mandates the destruction of ships bringing in cargoes of human misery, no seaworthy vessel undertakes such a venture. The disaster that nearly overtook these migrants had, thus, been waiting to happen.

To their good luck, they were rescued by a Norwegian cargo ship (MV Tampa) which then forced itself into Australian waters. It was stopped, boarded by Australian commandos and refused permission to unload the passengers on Australian soil. The captain's pleas of women, children and sick people being aboard cut no ice with Australia's conservative Prime Minister, John Howard. The popular approval of his tough stance against increasing non-white immigration was a god-send to revive his flagging fortunes. Elections are due this year.

After Indonesia refused to oblige by taking back the hapless migrants, Australia, amazingly, got East Timor to offer temporary shelter (paid for by the UN). Foreign minister and freedom activist Jose Ramos Horta said that, having endured oppression and exile themselves, the East Timorese could feel in their hearts what the stranded migrants must be enduring. Considering their shameless treatment of the Aborigines, it is questionable if the Aussies have a collective heart.

But within hours, Horta said Australia was making other arrangements. On second thought, the Aussies had obviously realised the scandalous implications of the dirt-poor Timor offering shelter where they had refused - even though a camp, complete with tents and beds, lay vacant on Australia's nearby Christmas Island (where previous arrivals were screened before being transported to the mainland for incarceration and processing).

To prove his point that they cannot touch Australian soil, Howard then contrived a deal to palm off 150 "rescuees" to New Zealand for "processing" and the rest to the remote Pacific islet of Nauru - located 6000 kilometres away! The matter is now before an Australian court to determine whether the migrants are illegally confined in MV Tampa and have a right to land in Australia.

The Durban conference having split along racial lines, the question to ask is: would the

Australians have acted the same way had the migrants been white? For that matter, would Britain or Italy or Europe be so piqued if the migrants trickling in there were white?

These questions sound academic because there seems no prospect of a migration from any white country to another. The great white West is, after all, enjoying unprecedented affluence thanks to lopsided globalisation, unfair free-trade and the leech-like capacity of its mega-corporations to suck the life blood from the emaciated bodies of the so-called developing, in fact dying, world. But there could be a fly in the ointment.

President Robert Mugabe, for his own political reasons (like his Australian counterpart), has made a big issue out of the colonial legacy of a mere 4500 wealthy white farmers

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owning 75% of Zimbabwe's prime land. He is confiscating white farms for parcelling them out to the landless black Zimbabweans. This has got Britain, the mother-lode, in a fret.

Some months back, as things were getting nasty, Britain was planning to evacuate the white Zimbabweans. Had such an eventuality come to pass, as it may in the future, where would all these colonial leftovers go? A big bulk would surely have been taken by Australia without a burp. And, their numbers are in many thousands.

**S**uch a migration, in fact, is already on. Many white Zimbabweans are moving out. Fearing a spillover into the so far peaceful, but very inequitable and very restive, South Africa, many whites are opting to leave rather than share the loot with the poor blacks. Add to this the Russian and East European diaspora. Yet, have we heard a squeak from Australia, Britain, Canada or New Zealand that they cannot take anymore?

Even so, racism is only one side of the picture. Poverty is the other. Thousands of our well heeled (or skilled) countrymen are finding acceptance in Canada and Australia - the destinations of choice. It is only the poor who must be kept out. But this is a fundamental contradiction of the new world politico-economic order.

On the one hand, free-market global capitalism is grinding the "developing" world into hopeless poverty. On the other, doors are being slammed in the faces of the miserable of these countries when, having risked their lives and invested fortunes in the hazardous journey, they come knocking. This discrimination is both racial and economic, and finds

no moral or economic sanction.

If the white race can move freely among "its" countries, why can't the non-white races do the same? After all, the borders of Australia, New Zealand and the Americas are no more sacred now than they were when the white colonialists forcibly occupied these countries and decimated the natives. The ever-moralising West, thus, has no moral leg to stand on in refusing ingress to non-white migrants on whose past and present misery its prosperity is built.

Even economically, blocking the free trans-border flow of labour is hypocritical when the West demands that the "developing" countries allow free access to its capital and enterprise. Like these two factors of production, the third (labour) must also move to where the conditions are optimum for profit maximisation. The barriers put up in its way make no economic sense. The only explanation is racial.

However, this discrimination takes on another dimension when we look within and find the society similarly segregated. The rich have their own jealously guarded enclaves, Islamabad being the prime example, where the poor can only enter to serve them. This apartheid is universal, found even in the developed world. The ultimate and eternal realities, thus, are wealth and poverty. Except the brief communist ascendancy, these evils have always co-existed in their extremes.

That is why all religions have started out as equalisers. But their core message of compassion for the poor has been the first to be swept aside by the kings and the clergy, who then monopolised religion and turned it into a new engine of oppression and exploitation. If the Hindu caste-system has institutionalised and sanctified slavery, even the Muslims have not heeded the profound Qur'anic injunction for the rich to return - please note the word return - to the people whatever is in excess of their needs.

Had this self-discipline been heeded and the socio-economic obligations fulfilled, there would be no need for coercive equalisation of the communist kind. If this message is still not heeded by the free-marketeers, the poor will rise again because equity as a human ideal is eternal. It cannot long remain a slave to capitalist greed and acquisitiveness - the woes of Russia, the enduring popularity of the defiant Fidel Castro and, above all, the rediscovery by anti-capitalism protesters of a forgotten icon, Che Guevara, are pointers to that.

If crafting an Islamic economic model is anathema to the West-afflicted elite which has ruined our country, it cannot be unaware that even the capitalist West taxes the rich to support the poor - and not the reverse, as is happening here. Repayment of debt cannot be an excuse to condemn 70 million Pakistanis to a sub-human existence, robbing them not only of physical security and material comforts but also of the essence of life - human dignity.

If half the country has to live that way, the other half has no right to live any better. If wealth cannot be shared, then poverty must be. Otherwise everything loses meaning - the law, constitution, democracy, the country, patriotism, even life.

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