

30/09/2001

A plea to let mutual understanding prevail

Munir Majid

IN the immediate aftermath of the horrific terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington, there was widespread fear the US would strike back with all its might at targets of its own choosing without regard to "collateral damage" - the euphemistic phrase that obscures loss of innocent civilian lives.

And the world would thus spin into a vicious cycle of more blood, hate and violence. Pitting the West against the Islamic world, as those targets would all have been in Muslim countries and the innocent lives those of adherents of the Islamic faith.

Thankfully, at least so far, this has not happened, although there are reports that small groups of elite forces have been deployed in hot pursuit of specific targets.

Thus, despite initial American Wild West rhetoric, ill-chosen phrases and intemperate language, it would appear wiser counsel has prevailed, as the US appears to have opted for a War on Terrorism across a wider front than just the military whilst building as broad a coalition as possible in that war to include also Muslim nations.

There is, therefore, still a chance the world will not go over the brink. It is so terribly important to grasp this opportunity to achieve mutual understanding, even if the Americans have to make military strikes, which I hope will be limited, to apprehend terrorists and destroy their organisations.

Let us begin this new round of building understanding by trying to comprehend the depth of American pain and anger at the terrorist outrage of Sept 11.

The callous, but coldly surgical, terrorist strike at the American "homeland" was the most calamitous ever in its entire history. The attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 has often been invoked in the current crisis. However that was not quite on the American mainland, was on a naval base even if without prior declaration of war, and resulted in the loss of "only" 1,500 lives.

Actually, the last foreign attack on the American heartland occurred in 1812, when the British razed the White House to the ground. The greatest loss of life on the mainland was self-inflicted, during the American Civil War.

In the Vietnam War, 50,000 Americans lost their lives over 10 years. More than a tenth of that figure, close to 7,000, died on Sept 11 before our very eyes. What the American people helplessly saw, along with many of us, was a terrible death, but no dead bodies.

It has been reported that many victims vapourised as fires, worsened by jet engine fuel, created temperatures of 2,000 degrees Centigrade. Such scorching, excruciating deaths of the innocents.

All this in America, supposed to be safe and secure, with the world's best defence systems, but obviously not designed against acts of terror that could be perpetrated by those driven by the genius of hate.

America was defeated in full display on the world stage. But the means were most foul, and there will be another time, other rounds, of America's choosing. From deep grief, anger and the desire for revenge rise, a catharsis.

The world feared the worst. Indiscriminate and disproportionate American retaliation would only lead to an escalation of conflict, terror and even

more bloodshed. In this climate of fear, the British writer Martin Amis suggested the horror of Sept 11 might only be "The first circle of hell". Many, including our own Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, while coming out firmly against terrorism and the atrocity in America, counselled caution and restraint.

In the event there has not been that explosion of American rage that was feared, although it is not clear how long this will hold. But just now the US appears to be intent on building a consensus and a grand coalition to include most Muslim countries, and on fighting terrorism on many fronts, including military action, but perhaps one which is surgical and precise.

While consensus is being built and strategies are being formulated, it might be useful for the Americans also to understand Muslims too have suffered misery and even more deaths, plenty sufficient of their and their leaders' own making, but more than enough because of US policies, of US actions - and also inaction.

The deep hurt and grievances are absolutely no justification for the despicable terrorist outrage in New York and Washington, but some American understanding and attempt to address them would go a considerable way towards success of the War on Terrorism by removing the cause that is turned and twisted into hate, desperation and madness.

Most Muslims and Islamic countries, like Malaysia, stand squarely with the US in opposing terrorism, but there are some American policies that need to be reviewed and issues reconsidered.

It has been estimated that over one million Iraqis have died since the Gulf War in 1991 from US-led bombings and sanctions. Overwhelmingly innocent men, women and children. It is no surprise that Muslims should be convulsed at the thought of some more possible bombing, this time in Afghanistan, with thousands of innocents victims.

In Bosnia, while there was Western humanitarian intervention in 1995, it only occurred after the massacres of Muslims at Srebrenica in the summer of that year - and this after over three years of the slaughter of tens of thousands of Bosnian Muslims by the genocidal Serbs.

The arms embargo served the Serbian interest against the largely defenceless Muslims, as the Yugoslav National Army armed the Bosnian Serbs with weapons designed to defend the formerly non-aligned Yugoslavia against the might of the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War. What chance did the Bosnian Muslims have?

It is not possible in this article to go through the whole list of Muslim suffering and grievances since the Second World War, but none is more central than the injustice to Palestinians in the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

Palestinian Arabs had to pay to salve the conscience of the Western World following the Jewish Holocaust in Europe under Hitler. They had to pay not only with their land but also with their blood against expansionist Zionism.

The State of Israel has been fully and totally supported by the US at the expense of the Arabs. All through the existence of the State of Israel, the Americans countenanced the Zionist State's expansionist encroachments, and so many atrocities.

Many Muslims remember Sabra and Shatila in 1982 when more than 1,000 Arab refugees, men, women and children were butchered by forces led by none other than the present Israeli Prime Minister.

Sharon now has the audacity to describe Palestinian leaders as "Israel's Osama bin Laden", obviously shamelessly trying to curry favour with the Americans and conveniently glossing over his own record as a terrorist, and that of a long line of Israeli leaders. It is little wonder that this cruel and heartless man was recently described by someone from the British

Foreign Office as "the cancer at the heart of the Middle East crisis".

It is astounding and quite unbelievable that the Israelis of all people, after all the Jewish suffering at the hands of the Gentiles, can be so cruel and so contemptuous of another race they are now so happy to lord over, just as so many of them were so happy to enjoy life as whites under the apartheid system in South Africa.

True, Arab terror too has sometimes known no bounds. An eye for an eye does not even begin to describe the cycle of terror in the Middle East. The point, however, is that Muslims and Arabs hold no monopoly over the use of terror, just as Americans and Israelis hold no monopoly as its victims.

Indeed the Israelis seem to have established an international standard on the worth of an Arab Muslim life, perhaps 100 Arab lives, if not more, to one Jewish. So, if the Arabs are losing out in the numbers game, should they return the compliment through the horror and atrocity of their terror?

This is madness. But it is just where we are, at the point of madness. There is a grave danger the world could plunge headlong into the abyss. We must pause and seize the opportunity offered by American circumspection, and it is only a breathing space, to turn swords into ploughshares.

We must try to understand each other's grievances and suffering. It would be the greatest act of statesmanship in American foreign policy to forge this understanding, along with the so many governments and peoples in the world, to find a way out and a way forward.

I believe Malaysia is one of those countries in the world that can play a useful role in that diplomatic mission, with its record of peaceful and stable economic development and modernisation, with its moderate policies of tolerance, and with a leader who is highly regarded in the Muslim and less developed world.