

25/11/2001

Giving terrorism a context

Nuraina A. Samad

COULD we ever forget that famous (or infamous, depending on which part of the world you are) "either you are with us or you are against us" quote by United States President George W. Bush?

Bush had issued a tough order.

And again, depending on which part of the world you are in, it can be regarded as a simple statement of fact or a threat.

To many, it seemed to be arm-twisting, bullying and arrogant.

Could it have been thought otherwise?

Well, it would have been a simple decision for many of its friends if the US had not included the bombing of Afghanistan in its greater scheme of things.

Malaysia, like the rest of the world, shared the grief of the American people when the World Trade Center in New York was destroyed on Sept 11.

No one can justify such a horrific act. It was, by any measure, unprecedented in modern peace time and unimaginable in the terror, fear, destruction and shock it had exacted.

Malaysia, certainly not a foe of the US, supported its war against terrorism.

But, bombing Afghanistan as a solution to end terrorism? Heck no, President, sir!

Bombing Afghanistan "to smoke 'em (Osama bin Laden included) out" is, rationally and logically not the answer.

Whether or not it was a rational decision, or whether it smacks of plain, unadulterated revenge, on the part of Bush and the US is quite academic now.

The bombing of Afghanistan began a month after the September attacks.

Now with the Northern Alliance victory and the entry of US and British forces, it still has not stopped.

And Osama is nowhere in sight.

Certainly, everything changed on Sept 11, and the United States and the world can never be the same.

The horror was before thousands of people, and almost immediately, millions others the world over witnessed it - again and again - on television.

The tragedy was not America's alone. It was the tragedy of the civilised world and we all make up this civilised world.

A tragedy because thousands of innocent people - not just American citizens but other nationalities - were killed in a city, touted as the symbol of American economic and financial success.

New York City represents everything that America is - or almost.

Malaysia, perhaps, is the most outspoken critic (outside the circle of interested parties) of the US bombing of Afghanistan.

But Malaysia is just as vocal in supporting the war against terrorism.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad almost immediately after the New York attack, expressed his sympathy but warned against a swift US retaliation.

What was important, he had said, was to find the causes and root of terrorism and work to overcome that - a view shared by many.

Last Friday, opening the two-day Conference on Terrorism hosted by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur, he said that if the world,

including the Muslim world, was asked to be part of the war to eliminate terrorists and terrorism, then it has to be a war against all terrorists including State-sponsored terrorism.

This, he said, includes the Israeli Government of Ariel Sharon.

Dr Mahathir was addressing the conference participants who included government and opposition politicians, key government officers, researchers, defence analysts, senior journalists and private sector representatives.

The conference, journalists were told, was closed-door and statements made were off the record.

Clearly, Malaysians are concerned about the threat of terrorism, having fought the communist insurgency for decades.

The conference expressed concern about this threat in the wake of the Sept 11 attacks.

It also made clear the importance of preventing further acts of terrorism by getting to the root causes for such acts.

Certainly bombing Afghanistan is not the solution to this.

In the aftermath of the attacks, the US appeared to have acted with revenge.

The US seemed to have deliberately refused to address the root cause of the terrorist act.

Consequently, the US has angered most of the Muslim world because it certainly seems that the bombing of Afghanistan is not a war against terrorism or Osama - the man the US believes to have masterminded the WTC attack - and his Al-Qaeda network but against Islam and Muslims.

This, of course, the US has denied. But, continued bombings, inflicting "collateral damage" (read: civilian casualty) have not helped.

And in the holy month of Ramadan, persistent pounding of Afghanistan has not stopped.

Indeed, terrorism constitutes a threat to individual, national and international security that can never be completely eliminated because even with the best efforts, there will always be fanatics, ideologues and alienated groups who may resort to terrorism to express their frustration and make their political point.

Strategists believe that combating terrorism requires looking beyond any one terrorist event, horrific as it may be, to address the broader socio-economic, political and military contexts from which terrorism emerges.

It is generally recognised that because terrorism is a political act, preventive strategies must address its political roots.

It has been widely recognised that a significant number of terrorist acts have developed in response to the political situation in the Middle East, where the US has long supported repressive regimes and Israel's military occupation.

US military power abroad, represented by its overseas military bases, often serves as a physical reminder of US political and military support for repressive regimes.

In fact, the Sept 11 attack is implicitly linked to this. Osama has condemned the US for this.

Of course, calling for the US to reorientate its foreign policy along the lines of respecting basic human rights and democratic freedom in the region, does not absolve terrorists from the culpability of their acts.

The sobering reality is that terrorism has existed in the world for a long time. In many countries there exist a terrorist or militant group.

To some people, they are terrorists but to others, they are freedom fighters. And since Sept 11, never has this subject of defining terrorism been more intense.

And never, since Sept 11, has interest in and discussions of Islam been

more intense.

The world cannot be party to this war against Afghanistan.

So, it is not that simple when Bush asked the world to make that choice.

What does it make the US, now that it has unleashed its military might on Afghanistan?

And by Bush's own admission, the war is not about to end any time soon. Frankly, we all know that it does not quite care if it does.

(END)