

In the wake of terror tragedies

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Last weekend, Pakistan and the world were shocked yet again. Senseless acts of terror were wielded against the All Saints Church in Peshawar after Sunday service. Pakistan's Prime Minister denounced the act in the strongest possible words before leaving for the United Nations meetings in New York, to attend what one sees as the world's annual meeting for peace and cooperation. Demonstrations have been held in Pakistan to show solidarity with the Christian minority, and also to underline the need for more security measures. The media have expressed sadness and shock. The Parliament held a special session to debate the tragedy.

In Nairobi, another terror attack shocked the Kenyans and the world. An upscale shopping mall was stormed and people were killed and injured indiscriminately, many of whom wealthy Kenyans, expatriates, tourists and visitors in the multicultural capital. The Kenya Vice-President William Ruto cut short his foreign travel. The tragedy created even more shock and sadness in Kenya than in Pakistan, it seems, partly because we in Pakistan have almost gotten used to unspeakable forms and sizes of terror.

I lived in Nairobi fifteen years ago when the American Embassy was bombed on 7 August 1998, and over two hundred people died and about four thousand were injured. The American Embassy in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, was bombed the same day and eleven people were killed and eighty-five injured. I had earlier been a diplomat in Tanzania and had daily passed by the American Embassy. The bomb attacks were unbelievable, sad and chilling, and so were last weekend's events. One cannot understand how religion can ever be used as justification, if it really ever is, except for as a disguise.

From 1998 on, Osama bin Laden and the Al-Qaeda network were outlawed. Osama is now gone, but the Al-Qaeda network still exists. The militant Al-Shabaab group in Somalia, with strings to Al-Qaeda and other international groups, was behind the Nairobi tragedy from last Sunday until yesterday.

There may be some reason behind the Kenya tragedy, but the militants used entirely unacceptable means. Al-Shabaab has demanded that the Kenya military, supported by the West, must leave southern Somalia. However, Kenya entered that area after Somali militants had organized several attacks inside Kenya, and further attacks were feared.

If the Nairobi tragedy was senseless, then the Peshawar church tragedy was even more senseless, and one cannot logically understand who it is that is behind it, be it local or foreign groups. Sometimes, we just conclude that terror is purposeless; its aim is to create uncertainty and fear. The British Prime Minister David Cameron said that in a comment about the recent tragedy in Pakistan.

What happened is illogical and senseless: What would anyone fear from some Christian worshippers in Peshawar, or Christians anywhere else in the land? What would anyone have against the religious minority?

It would have been easier to understand if the Christian minority had complained about their situation in their land since it is a fact that the Christians are not always seen as equal citizens by everyone. Most of the some five million Christians form a lower class and is often not properly integrated in the mainstream society. On the other hand, there are many Christians who are well integrated, some do well in society and are highly respected by all. We should also note that there are other religious

minorities in Pakistan: small groups of Hindus, Sikhs and members of other faiths, who may rank even lower on the social ladder than the Christians.

It is a fact that Islam and Christianity are very closely related religions, historically and presently, and I believe we in Pakistan should emphasize that more clearly. Isn't it high time that we show more religious openness and generosity towards each other? And since Islam is the state-religion of Pakistan, the state and the Muslim leaders have the main responsibility for stretching out an open hand to Christians and people of other faiths, not withstanding that positive inter-faith activities already take place.

In Pakistan as in Kenya, I believe that the class differences will be more dangerous in future than religious differences. There seems to be more disagreements *within* than *between* religions, hence modernization of religions, including Islam must come from within. In religious as well as secular affairs, impulses from outside must always be indigenous and local.

Kenya is a Western-oriented country and Nairobi is an international and multicultural city. Christianity and Islam are the largest religions in the land, and people live and worship peacefully side-by-side. There is a large Asian community in Kenya (over half a million), with Hindus and Sikhs who came to help build the railway in East Africa over a hundred years ago; today, many are wealthy businessmen and professionals. There may be some ethnic conflicts, but less religious conflicts. I should add that Kenyans are religious people, also embracing novel sects and ideas, and Nairobi has a dynamic, open and tolerant atmosphere.

In my home country Norway, there are about three percent Muslims, a similar percentage to Christians in Pakistan. Norway has a large and successful Pakistani community, in an overwhelmingly Christian country, or 'culturally Christian', since many are not regular church-goers and may not be active believers. It is the challenge of the West to find ways of integrating Muslims better and make all citizens feel equal and included, irrespective of religion, culture and social backgrounds. That is also a challenge in Pakistan.

It may be interesting to note that in May this year the Norwegian state church was dissolved, making Lutheran-Protestantism one of many faiths, including the Muslim faith, of course, with some one hundred and fifty congregations. To loosen the relationship between the church and state in Norway (as had already been done in the other Scandinavian countries) is important symbolically for locals and immigrants.

Most countries have one dominant religion, but most countries will in future also have more groups belonging to other religions. We should be reminded that political parties who win elections must also take the interests of various minorities into consideration. That is the same in the religious spheres.

In order for everyone to live peacefully together in our societies, which have become more diverse due to migration and for other reasons, we have to work for greater equality and openness. We must ensure that everyone has a stake in the local community, and that major values are shared.

I keep underlining the importance of reducing class differences, yes, more than religious differences. It is only fairness, equality and mutual respect that can lead to a better life for all. Sadly, in many ways, the world has in recent years moved in the opposite direction. It may not eliminate all types of militancy and terrorism, but it will bring it down to a very low level.

Latest: Education is a fundamental tool to create greater equality, inclusiveness, understanding and tolerance. It was therefore particularly important that Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday, while at the UN in New York, announced that Pakistan will increase its education expenditure from about two to four percent of GDP – yes, being able to catch up with Kenya, which has much higher primary school enrolment and completion rate than Pakistan.

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