

WE WON'T FORGET SEPTEMBER 11 EITHER

By Dr. Shahid Athar

On September 11th, 2001 at 8:00am it was a quiet morning as usual. I usually come to my office a few minutes earlier than the day starts and submerge myself in the paperwork of the day before. All of the sudden my secretary came running and said "look at the TV!" She heard something while driving that New York had been hit by terrorists. So I went to the waiting room where the TV was already on and what we watched was like a horror movie. We were in shock.

I saw the flames coming out of Tower I and while I was still watching live, the second plane moved in to hit the second tower and the second tower blew up. Then the tragedy and the misery that followed for many days after that started. We were pinned to our television set, my office staff, my partner and my patients. It was very hard to work. I could not concentrate, feeling nauseated and dizzy. Many of my patients had high blood pressure and high blood sugars that morning.

What we saw, the death and destruction, was unbelievable. We never thought that this could happen. I thought that we had an Air force that would shoot down such planes coming to hit our Country. I thought that we had CIA and FBI agents who would try to find out about these terrorist plots before this could actually happen. Unfortunately, they were all helpless under these forces of evil attacking our Country and innocent people.

We, the American Muslims, always have another worry. In such disasters as happened in the Oklahoma City bombing, the Muslims are immediately blamed and for the next 12 hours that the day we had the agony of trying to protect ourselves and our faith from another type of attack. The same thing happened again but this time it seemed more real.

The phones started ringing in our office as I am known in the community as an Islamic leader, writer and speaker. So some of those angry folks had no one else to avenge their anger and frustration except me. The first phone call was an ugly, angry voice asking "is this Bin Laden's headquarters?" My receptionist who did not know who Bin Laden was, said "no this is Dr. Athar's office." The next phone call, a message left on the answering machine, was of profanity then saying " we will bomb you Muslims out." After listening to this message, she started crying and thought that this was real. That afternoon I closed my office early, let all my employees go home and gave them the next day off.

As we learned later, the hate crimes against Muslims and everyone else who looked different than "a regular American" started to occur all over the Country.

There were 650 such cases against Muslims and over 200 against Sikhs including several murders and other incidents such as attacks on Mosques in Cleveland and Detroit. Last night I was watching on NightLine about how a Saudi Radiologist from Texas was arrested by mistake and jailed for 10 days because his name was similar to one of the alleged hijackers. I understand all of this. Our emotions were on fire because our Country and our people were on fire.

For the last 20 years, I have written and spoken against terrorism by individuals and groups of all faiths. I consider terrorism a modern plague that we must fight together so that we can live in peace and sleep without fear. Terrorists are cowardly people who prey on innocent civilians trying to create havoc. As the President of the Islamic Medical Association, I immediately issued within the next few hours of getting the news, a statement condemning terrorist attacks on American soil on innocent civilians in the World Trade Center and the military personnel in the Pentagon. I called for the swift apprehension and punishment of the perpetrators.

In my statement I said " no political cause could ever be justified or assisted by such criminal acts" and I prayed for the innocent lives which were lost and the protection of all fellow human beings. I immediately urged the Muslim Physicians in New York and Washington D.C. to go and provide emergency medical relief for the injured and psychological support for their relatives as well as participate in the blood donation drives. I urged Americans in general and the media in particular against unnecessary discrimination, stereo typing and prejudice against Islam and Muslims, Arabs and all other ethnic backgrounds. I also urged through another press release to Muslim Physicians to be a spokesperson against terrorism, uphold) the sanctity of human life which they are trained for and to render acts of kindness to all Americans irrespective of their faith and ethnic background. I authorized IMANA to immediately donate \$5,000.00 for the disaster relief apart from individual Physician's personal contributions.

I called the White House and offered our support for President Bush's fight against terrorism with whatever it takes. I understand that it is going to be a long and difficult battle that we must endure. However, at the same time, I feel that we should try to figure out why people become terrorists and how we can shut down the factory which creates terrorists. It may be the plight of the people in the refugee camps of Palestine or refugee camps of Afghanistan with lack of food, sanitation, health care and water that turns their anger and frustration against the super power. I feel that injustice is a raw ingredient for this factory that creates terrorists.

We must oppose it so that we Americans are not seen as taking the side of the oppressor but seen as a benefactor. In my letter to the Indianapolis Star, published

on 9-18-01, I quoted Dr. Martin Luther King who had said " peace is not mere absence of tension but presence of justice" and I quoted Talmud, the Jewish writing which says "more justice, more peace." I quoted one of the banners I saw on television from Palestinian children which said " no justice, no peace." We need to tie all these things together. We should have a long term plan on fighting terrorism in every form including punishing those who use religion for their evil designs and hatred. We must also to help the innocent civilians, children and oppressed women. I feel strongly that our enemies are terrorists and not their children and other civilians nor peace loving Arabs or Muslims.

Then, the second set of phone calls started. This time from the media, newspapers, radio stations, television reporters, asking me for interviews. I have given many of such interviews, not only locally but in other cities over the phone. I have been quoted in many newspapers and magazines. People are asking many questions. One of the questions asked to me as it was asked to other Theologians, was about God. " Among this tragedy, where is God and was this tragedy an act of God or of the devil?" My brief response was that God has given us free will to choose between right and wrong, between good and evil and such tragedies, though they may occur with the full knowledge of God, are acts of humans and not acts of God.

Religion in the hands of good people makes them beneficent but it has been used by bad people to cause evil. In fact, terrorists have no religion to begin with because all religions uphold the sanctity of human life. In both the Torah and in Quran it is said " if any one has killed one person (except in lieu of murder or mischief on earth) as if he has killed the whole mankind., and if he has saved one life it is as if he has saved the whole mankind (5:32)"

Therefore, God can not be responsible for the actions of man as He gives us a test to see how we respond to temptations of doing evil and when we suffer from acts of evil, how we take care of others by our good work including forgiveness. I was also asked about racial profiling and hate crimes taking place. In my writing to the Indianapolis Star which was published on 9-15-01, I said, "I am totally opposed to racial profiling of any Americans. If we do this now to Arabs and Muslims, tomorrow it will be Chinese, Afro Americans, Indians, Sikhs and everyone else.

The terrorists wish that we also become terrorists and terrorize all Americans, make the USA a policed state and issue ID cards like the Nazis did to Jews. This will increase the harassment of Arabs and Muslims already taking place.

Background checks for sensitive jobs and airport search for security is a must but racial profiling is not. This will ensure only discrimination without freedom from terrorists as terrorists can be of any race and of any faith or no faith." In addition to

my public statements, radio, television and newspaper interviews, I have been swarmed by requests from Churches and other places of worship to visit them and teach them about the true Islam, the Islam which is "mercy to mankind". I have made several presentations and I am scheduled for many more. These presentations are at the request of Christians who are peace loving, not the ones to which Tim McVeigh belonged or those phone callers to my office or those who sent hate E-mail to me.

I got many phone messages, cards, E-mails and letters in support of Islam and Muslims from patients who know me and do not know me and from Jews and Christians. One of my patients wrote "I hope you and the rest of the Muslim community in Indianapolis have not had to suffer any of the abuse and insults that have been mentioned in the newspapers and in the media. I certainly hope that if you have been the victim of any actions, that they were not done in the name of Christianity. We have no sympathy for those in our Country who have been taking their frustrations out on others who do not look like them."

A letter from Reverend Duane Grady reads as such "Just a few words of sorrow for the way in which citizens are responding to the tragic event of this week. Lashing out in anger and at people who have nothing to do with this event is such a sad commentary of our time. Please know and share with members of the Mosque that there are Christian leaders who are preaching from our pulpits that need for forgiveness and tolerance.

We have too often seen the painful experience of responding to bloodshed with more bloodshed and how often innocent people are harmed in both instances. My prayers are with you and your family and your community. I have thought of you often in the past few days. May the wisdom of God who taught us to love and seek peace prevail in these challenging times."

Another letter was from a Professor Emeritus of Law, Dr. Funk. "I am so sorry to hear of the attacks on and threats against Muslims in America. I can only assume that these are ignorant individuals who I hope will apologize later for their actions." Pauline Vermillon of Speedway Christian Church wrote "My heart is absolutely broken thinking of the injustices done to people around the world. I just feel we have not been responsive to the needs of the rest of the world as a nation. I would like to think we are more mature than to take our frustration out on Arab Americans."

The most touching gesture was a rose left on my desk from a Franciscan, Sister Margaret Funk, with a note of prayer. A prayer was given to me by an 85 year old Catholic Nun, Sister Rose, when I was working on the third day of the disaster in a

remote town in a small Catholic Hospital. She came and hugged me and prayed for me.

May God protect us all. (Amin)