

On the September 11, 2001 tragedy

By Arjun Makhijani

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“An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind.” Mahatma Gandhi

The September 11 events of global terror — people from about eighty countries perished — cry out for a global response to help make the world as secure as we can from the threat of mass destruction. This was not the first or the most devastating event of mass destruction. Air warfare was created in the twentieth century as an instrument of state terror to entirely neutralize or destroy cities, thereby obliterating the difference between combatants and non-combatants in war. Nuclear weapons extended the terror of conventional explosive bombing and fire bombing to a new dimension. But September 11, 2001 has nonetheless created a dreadful watershed in world history. The preponderance of evidence indicates that a non-state party, a terrorist network, has now used civilian aircraft as weapons of mass destruction to kill thousands.

It is imperative that the U.S. government follows a path that will protect civilians while it tries to get the cooperation of the world to capture the suspects. And the goal should be a trial. October 2 is Gandhi's birthday. One of his favorite stories might provide inspiration toward that goal. A mother, frustrated at her inability to convince her son to reduce his consumption of sweets, took him to the village priest in the hope that he could convince him. But the priest merely said: “Please come back in two weeks.” Two weeks later, the priest looked the boy in the eyes and said: “I think you should reduce your sugar consumption.” Puzzled, the mother asked the priest why he had not said that two weeks before. “At that time, I was eating quite a lot of sweets myself,” he replied.

Gandhi's methods started with the individuals, who he said should “become the change we want to see in the world.” Personal decisions to voluntarily reduce individual oil consumption, for instance, could be as much a part of a nonviolent response to the tragedy of September 11. Oil, after all, is at the center of the violent tangle of Central Asian and Persian Gulf politics.

Gandhi maintained this position even though Indians suffered violence at the hands of India's British rulers. In a notorious instance, in Amritsar in 1919, British troops fired on unarmed men, women and children meeting in an enclosed courtyard, until they ran out of bullets, killing hundreds. (Most were Sikhs, some of whom have been experiencing indiscriminate violence in the United States in the aftermath of September 11 because the men wear turbans and have beards.) Yet Gandhi insisted that India's struggle for independence remain non-violent no matter how much violence the British used.

It is also imperative that the United States seek genuine, not dictated, world cooperation to apprehend the suspects. It should, at a minimum, renounce first use of nuclear weapons in any conflict. It should also commit that any action it takes will not further involve bombing of cities and villages or impoverish ordinary people, especially, the Afghani people, who have been suffering hardship and death on a vast scale for more than two decades as a result of Cold War and post-Cold War politics.



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