

October 2, Gandhi's birthday

By Arjun Makhijani

Today is the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, one of the greatest political figures in human history. Yet his life and work are at the margins of global political discourse. Perhaps the facts that people from eighty countries died in the terrorist violence of September 11 and that most are buried together in the tearful ashes of the World Trade Center will move us to seek inspiration from Gandhi's life.

The "relentless search for truth" was at the center of Gandhi's political work. In that spirit, we must note, even in the midst of our grief, that September 11, 2001 was not the first or the most devastating event of mass destruction. There have been such events on every continent, over the ages. Air warfare itself was created in the twentieth century as an instrument of state terror.

Brigadier Giulio Douhet, an Italian who first expounded air warfare doctrine wrote that "[t]he conception of belligerents and nonbelligerents is outmoded. Today it is not the armies but whole nations which make war; and all civilians are belligerents and all are exposed to the hazards of war. The only salvation will be in caves, but those caves cannot hold entire cities, fleets, railways, bridges, industries, etc."

Ironically and tragically, the evidence indicates that a terrorist network, allegedly centered in the mountainous caves of Afghanistan, has now adopted the same strategy, though with different tactics. September 11 was a watershed in world history because such a network was apparently able to finance and coordinate, over a period of several years, preparations for a series of simultaneous acts of mass destruction from the air. It thereby achieved a grim capability heretofore generally assumed to be the province of states.

Gandhian methods have been used in India and elsewhere, most notably by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the United States and Nelson Mandela in South Africa, to confront powerful states with demands for justice and freedom. But how can Gandhian principles be extended to the struggle against terrorist violence?

First, it is crucial to recognize that a process is needed to investigate the crime and obtain judicial redress before an international court. That the United States has not been an exemplar of rectitude in protecting civilians while pursuing its interests abroad cannot be the basis for any equivocation in the condemnation of the mass murder of September 11 or for hesitation in the pursuit of suspects against whom there is evidence.

Second, the United States is asking governments around the world to join in a coalition against terrorism. Given that people from eighty countries died, they have reason to do so. But that cannot become a *carte blanche* for U.S. action — either you are with us or you are against us, President Bush has said. That message is creating dangerous divisions, most of all in Pakistan, where the security of nuclear weapons and nuclear materials under conditions of war is far from guaranteed.

A coalition under the United Nations that unequivocally renounces the use of weapons of mass destruction and of violence against civilians, including bombing of cities, villages, or refugee camps, would elicit far broader public support, since it would be built on an explicit commitment of respect for



the life and human rights. A repeat of opportunistic Cold War alliances and tactics, which contributed to the present state of world insecurity in no small measure, can only sow the seeds of future problems. Gandhi urged that “We must become the change we want to see in the world.” No message could be more timely in the struggle against violence and terror.

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