

The following statement was given by Rania Masri, Ph.D., a panel member at the Teach-In "Understanding the Attack on America: an Alternative View," held at the UNC-Chapel Hill campus on Sept. 17, 2001. Masri is a national board member of both Peace Action and the Education for Peace in Iraq Center. She is an Arab-American from Lebanon. She can be reached at 'rania@nc.rr.com'

Speaking for Peace

While I mourn for the victims of the September 11th terrorist attacks and strongly condemn that horrific terrorist attack, being a peace- and social-justice activist, I am also deeply concerned for tomorrow. I fear the rise of racism, the loss of more innocent lives (both in the U.S. and abroad), and the further erosion of civil rights in the United States.

Since last week's terrorist attacks, various "Middle-Eastern looking" minority communities -- including some Muslim-Americans, Arab-Americans, and Sikh-Americans -- have suffered hundreds of (reported) verbal assaults, harassments, and physical attacks. In pockets across the US, verbal threats have become direct physical assaults. In the Chicago area alone, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at an Arab-American community center, roving gangs and thugs attacked Arabs and Muslims, and an Arab-American gas station attendant was attacked with a 2-foot-long machete. Similar assaults have taken place across the country. In Denton, Texas, a Molotov cocktail was tossed into a mosque, the third attack on an area mosque in two days. In Norfolk, Virginia, a brick was thrown through the window of a mosque at Old Dominion University. And the list of physical assaults goes on ...

Such physical assaults have been fatal in other parts in the country. On September 15 in Arizona, a gunman killed Balbir Singh Sodhi, a 49-year-old Sikh gas-station owner. Later that same evening in Texas, another gunman shot and killed Waqar Hassan Choudhry, a 40-year old Pakistani-Muslim storeowner. Both of their families believe they were killed because they looked 'Middle Eastern.'

Although the media has been supportive in highlighting these assaults, and, in some instances, in condemning the assaults, the mainstream media has not been as objective as it needs to be. The TV media has repeatedly aired clippings of a small group of Palestinians rejoicing, while failing to state that all Palestinian organizations have condemned the attacks. The terrorist act was strongly condemned by every single Palestinian organization and entity: Fatah, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Hamas, unions, Human Right Organizations (AlHaq, Law, Palestine Center for Human Rights), workers committees, student associations, municipalities, mosques and churches, etc. Dozens of Palestinian men, women and children gathered spontaneously upon hearing the news in front of the U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem, lighting candles and placing flowers along its walls. Some of the placards they carried read: "Terror is our common enemy" and "We are victims too." Even the US Council in Jerusalem was pained to see that the media chose to focus on the sensational images of a few. These clippings have also furthered the already rampant dehumanization of Palestinians, and all Arabs, in the US.

The media has also repeatedly reported on ‘suspects’ who ‘look Middle Eastern,’ thus further fueling the xenophobic sentiment that is taking hold of a small group of violent people, all of whom appear to ‘look European.’ (I emphasize here that the assaults are perpetrated by a small group of people. The overwhelming response from Americans has been supportive and anti-racist.)

After the bombing of the Oklahoma Federal Building, a terrorist attack that was committed by a “European-American, Christian, Gulf War Veteran,” an unconstitutional and blatantly prejudicial bill was passed. The *1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act*, signed by the Clinton administration with bipartisan backing in Congress, has allowed the INS to arrest, detain and deport legal residents on the basis of evidence the source and substance of which is not revealed to the potential deportees or their lawyers. The ‘evidence’ itself has typically consisted of hearsay. Practically all of the ‘accused’ have been politically active Arabs and Muslims, some of whom have been imprisoned for 3-4 years without being charged with a crime. At least 13 of these cases have been overturned on appeals. There remain more than 24 individuals nationwide imprisoned without trial on the basis of such “secret evidence.”

The *Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act* did not save the U.S. from terrorist attacks; it did succeed, however, in tearing the lives of dozens of people, and in tearing at the fabric of the U.S. justice system. Will another bill that weakens the American justice system be signed into law?

Now, there is much talk of war, of a ‘war against terrorism’ of a “crusade” against evil. Georgia Senator Zell Miller represented this spirit to lash out when he said, “I say bomb the hell out of them. If there's collateral damage, so be it.” [NY Times 9/13/01]. Who are “them”?

Are they the people of Afghanistan, a people already suffering? Their civilian infrastructure, their educational systems, and their hospitals have already been significantly destroyed by both the previous military Soviet occupation and the present Taliban regime. What will additional suffering – by military strikes against this impoverished country – provide, except more loss of innocent lives, and increased hate against the US?

Are they also the people of Iraq, a people imprisoned by an 11-year state of siege? Everyday, approximately 150 Iraqi children under the age of five die due to the effects of sanctions, while the US continues to bomb Iraqi cities on a weekly basis.

Or does it not really matter who “they” are – so long as revenge is lashed out against some country that resists US dominance?

Instead of speaking the language of violence, it is vital that the language of understanding be utilized. The question that must be explored here should be: ‘why was the U.S. targeted?’

The traditional peace movement, human rights organizations, religious leaders (Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders), progressive historians and intellectuals, and various political leaders – from the Socialist party to the Green party to progressive Democrats – are calling for reason and understanding. Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr, stated, “We have a profound opportunity not

only to investigate ‘who’ and ‘how’; this was done, but also-more importantly-‘why’ it was done. We may not be able to consider it today -- the pain, the hurt, the suffering and the anger are too great -- but maybe in our tomorrows. When we have the answer to ‘why,’ then we will be better able to work toward the day when such tragedies will never happen again.”

Rabbi Arthur Waskow further stated, “Human beings become terrorists in a pool of despair; we must dry up that pool of despair by replacing despair with dignity and justice in all neighborhoods on this planet.”

Unfortunately, the current sentiment of Congress is for war. On September 14, the Senate voted 98-0 for a war resolution, authorizing the president “to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on Sept. 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons...”

In the U.S. House, there was one lonely voice of opposition. Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California’s 9th district (Oakland-Berkeley area) was the only member of Congress to vote against the resolution authorizing war. Her action is reminiscent of the stance taken by Senator Wayne Morse, the senior senator from Oregon, who was one of only two senators against the Tonkin Gulf Resolution of 1964. He refused to support the Vietnam War on both practical and moral grounds. He refused to acquiesce to the media’s war fever.

Will we Americans, as a people, acquiesce to the war fever? Or will we speak out against further violence with the same compassion that a majority of Americans are speaking out against racism? In the calls for ‘unity’ that are sweeping the U.S., will voices opposed to further militarization and opposed to military bombardment be allowed to be heard? And, *whose* voice will ultimately be heard – the voice of Senator Zell Miller or that of Congresswoman Barbara Lee?

The road to peace IS the road to security.

Let us use two powerful weapons, weapons of nonviolence: the pen and the phone. Write the News and Observer. Voice the logic of peace. Call Reps. Price and Etheridge and Sen. Edwards – and let them know that we want them to stand with the brave and principled Barbara Lee.

The road to peace and justice begins with the implementation of peace and justice, at home and abroad. In this time of deep mourning, let us be united in ensuring that the no more innocent families will mourn.