

'Faiths for Peace' event - by the MCB Secretary General

Over the past few weeks a great deal of attention has been paid to the differences between us. Differences in politics, in race and in faith. So we thought we might, in a small but hopefully significant way, attempt to redress that imbalance. After all, redressing imbalances in perception has become something of a habit for us Muslims. A habit borne out of necessity. As a result of some rather hasty planning, here we are: Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs - united for a common purpose, in the company of people from a variety of faith communities that make up multi-faith Britain. We purposefully chose to arrange this evening's event at a venue that symbolises our common heritage and shared future. The Commonwealth has played a unifying role over the past fifty five years and I am grateful to the Institute for hosting us today at relatively short notice.

At the height of tensions between India and Pakistan only a few weeks ago we stood on the precipice of a calamity. We watched with growing anxiety as foreign governments - and ours - first advised and then urged their nationals to leave India and Pakistan. Newspapers even started citing defence experts who mused about probable dates for the start of war. The US State Department likened it to the Cuban missile crisis. Some of us lived through that event forty years ago hoped we would never again have to endure the prospect of imminent nuclear conflict. The end of the cold war reinforced that optimism. But sadly, a whole new generation is now growing up learning about the chilling details of how long it takes for missiles to travel across international borders and how many millions of lives they can wipe out in the first few minutes.

For the time being, it does look as if wiser counsels have prevailed. But the feeling is more of cautious relief than joy. For tensions persist and the situation remains dangerous. The world community still has a role to play in urging both countries to resolve their differences peacefully through the United Nations. The international community needs to care because this is a crisis that affects us all. Here in Britain, the greatest responsibility is perhaps on the people that will be affected most directly: Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs - British Asians. People like myself, who have family members and friends who live in the south Asian sub-continent.

British Asians have demonstrated time and again their strength of feeling for the welfare of communities in the sub-continent. We are galvanised into action especially in the face of natural disasters - such as the earthquake in India a couple of years ago. Here and now there is also a need for us to act - this time before a man-made disaster takes place. It is important that we use whatever influence we may have positively and effectively. Both by lobbying our own government in Britain to give this issue its highest priority. Efforts have been made in this regard by the Foreign Secretary Jack Straw. But more needs to be done to avert tragedy in the long-run.

We need to demonstrate to our own communities here in Britain and to the world at large that our shared aspirations for a lasting peace based on justice and international law and our opposition to war is stronger and more enduring than our differences.

By holding out our own example of multi-faith and multi-cultural co-existence and co-operation here in Britain, we must do what we can to instil a sense of hope and optimism for the future of India and Pakistan. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others regularly participate in multi-faith forums and events both at national and local level. This advances understanding and goodwill. We work together in various government forums such as the Inner Cities Religious Council and the Race Relations Forum to name but two. The work we do there helps promote the practical well-being of all our communities. And of course, across towns and cities across the country we live as neighbours, our children attend the same schools and we work in the same organisations. The lesson of all this must be that there is another way to resolving our differences: whether we live in Britain or in the Indian sub-continent. This message needs to be reinforced at grassroots level through our mosques, temples and gurdwaras. Our religious leaders have a crucial role to play here.

The only war that need be waged is a war against our common enemies: here in Britain and increasingly across Europe we need to fight racism and discrimination. We need jointly to resist the rise of the far right. In the Indian sub-continent the greatest evil is poverty. We should help both in increasing aid and in promoting fair trade.

Through this evening's event, we want to harness the goodwill and co-operation that exists amongst the Muslim, Hindu and Sikh faiths specifically and all faiths generally and present a united platform for peace. We hope it will send a strong signal to both the Indian and Pakistani governments to resolve the dispute peacefully. Here at home we hope to reinforce good community relations through this practical expression of unity and co-operation for the common good.