

“The world has to deal with Hamas”

Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon, in an interview in New Delhi recently, calls for dialogue and cooperation whether it is in handling Hamas' victory in the Palestinian elections or the row over the cartoons on Prophet Muhammed. Excerpts:

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You have spoken a lot about the need for democracy over the years. How do you deal with a group like Hamas that has come to power through the democratic process?

You have to deal with them. In a way, I can understand some of the reactions on Hamas. But, you always have to remember that an organisation like the Palestinian state, which is still to become a sovereign state, people under those circumstances will always be quite determined about their vote.

And, being determined about their vote, they may well go beyond what is considered to be the centre of gravity. It's a kind of a reaction they [the people] have. This is a group that has made life very difficult for many over a period of time. When a group like this comes into government, you invariably find that, suddenly, responsibilities do change their attitudes. I think that is highly likely ... I hope that those who have to deal with them give them [Hamas] a little breathing space ... of course; the principal issue is going to be the Palestinian state.

But, nevertheless, the Palestinian people are expecting something from them [Hamas]. And, I hope others, ultimately, can deal with them in a way that engenders cooperation, honesty, and integrity on both sides.

You're the Secretary-General of an organisation that straddles both the West and the East. On the cartoon issue, the objectionable depiction of Prophet Muhammed, it appears that sections of the West are not at all sensitive towards questions of religion.

We just have to work much harder to get to know each other. Those of us who have come from the so-called liberal West do get used to a large amount of freedom. But nothing that I can think of can make me go out and burn flags or buildings. I would be very offended if I saw a cartoon image of Jesus Christ in a similar kind of way.

So, we do have to learn a little bit more about each other. In some things, you have to be more sensitive. Despite the fact that we will always talk about the freedom of the press, media and speech, we always know that there have been inherent boundaries on ourselves as individuals, on our communities, within our media.

There's never been a defined boundary; there's always been the knowledge that there's a kind of a boundary. There's some things, which you just wouldn't report on; wouldn't photograph or put in a cartoon.



Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon: “We just have to work much harder to get to know each other.” – PHOTO: V. SUDERSHAN.

Here, we have a situation where one cartoonist, one editor, and one fairly innocent country went over that boundary.

But other newspapers published the cartoon “in solidarity” ...

I would think that they would now be thinking that it was a kind of stupid thing to do. I'm not sure if anyone, anywhere, is going to be stupid enough to create a new cartoon, or a cartoon of a similar nature in future. Now, we know there's a certain boundary

about an issue we need to be more sensitive about.

Everyone now is probably repositioning themselves. It's a bit sad that the objections have gone on for such a long time. And, now people are being killed. I'm not sure if that is really justified. That people should lose their lives.

All this is happening in a post-September 11, 2001, context. Just because you happen to belong to the Muslim religion, you become a

target even when you have nothing to do with extremists at all.

There is a post 9/11 [context]. The issue of Iraq is all wrapped in it. But, also we are living in a far more inter-dependent world. We are bumping into each other on many more issues. The number of nations that are now involved in international trade negotiations is almost double that of the last Uruguay round.

Despite all that, more people are living in circumstances where the people next door to them, or working with them, are of a different race, religion, linguistic group or ethnicity than ever before. We seem to be surviving that despite everything else.

Picking up on the trade issue, are you satisfied with the attitude of the developed world towards least developed countries? Will the LDCs be able to get anything out of this trade round?

The current state is like the curate's egg – it's good in parts. Certain commitments by the European Union and the United States do go halfway to remedying the unbalanced state of international trade. The huge agricultural subsidies in Europe and the United States clearly have to come down to the point of ultimate elimination.

We are only going to see benefits to developing countries that are principal commodity producers when those barriers come down. There's a kind of door open to the LDCs for a number of things and that's good.

Turning to Pakistan, you seem to be the last person who's talking about General Pervez Musharraf and that he needs to take off his uniform. For the rest of the world, it's not an issue ...

I've really taken the lead from our Commonwealth leaders. Our Commonwealth leaders when they were in Malta, just a few months ago, received a report on the issue of Pakistan, which remains on the agenda of the Ministerial Action Group. They [the Group] reiterated the position taken that it wasn't within Commonwealth values to have these two offices [Army Chief and President] residing in the one person. That [position] was endorsed by Commonwealth leaders.

But leading members of the Commonwealth no longer raise the uniform issue with Gen. Musharraf.

Well, some do raise the issue, some tell me they raise the issue. It's for each country to determine the nature of the bilateral relationship [with Pakistan].

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