
THE PALESTINIAN VISION OF PEACE

Yasir Arafat

For the past 16 months, Israelis and Palestinians have been locked in a catastrophic cycle of violence, a cycle which only promises more bloodshed and fear. The cycle has led many to conclude that peace is impossible, a myth borne out of ignorance of the Palestinian position. Now is the time for the Palestinians to state clearly, and for the world to hear clearly, the Palestinian vision. But first, let me be very clear. I condemn the attacks carried out by terrorist groups against Israeli civilians. These groups do not represent the Palestinian people or their legitimate aspirations of freedom. They are terrorist organizations and I am determined to put an end to their activities.

The Palestinian vision of peace is an independent and viable Palestinian state on the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, living as an equal neighbor alongside Israel with peace and security for both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. In 1988, the Palestine National Council adopted a historic resolution calling for the implementation of applicable United Nations resolutions, particularly Resolutions 242 and 338. The Palestinians recognized Israel's right to exist on 78 percent of historical Palestine with the understanding that we would be allowed to live in freedom on the remaining 22 percent, which has been under Israeli occupation since 1967.

Our commitment to that two-state solution remains unchanged, but unfortunately, also remains unreciprocated. We seek true independence and full sovereignty: the right to control our own airspace, water resources and borders; to develop our own economy, to have normal commercial relations with our neighbors and to travel freely. In short, we seek only what the free world now enjoys and only what Israel insists on for itself: the right to control our own destiny and to take our place among free nations.

In addition, we seek a fair and just solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees who for 54 years have not been permitted to return to their homes. We understand Israel's demographic concerns and understand that the right of return of Palestinian refugees, a right guaranteed under international law and United Nations Resolution 194, must be implemented in a way that takes into account concerns. However, just as we Palestinians must be realistic with respect to Israel's demographic desires, Israelis too must be realistic in understanding that there can be no solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict if the legitimate rights of these innocent civilians continue to be ignored. Left unresolved, the refugee issue has the potential to undermine any permanent peace agreement between Palestinians and Israelis. How is a Palestinian refugee to understand that his or her right of return will not be honored but those of

Kosovar Albanians, Afghans and East Timorese have been? There are those who claim that I am not a partner in peace. In response, I say Israel's peace partner is, and always has been, the Palestinian people. Peace is not a signed agreement between individuals — it is reconciliation between peoples. Two peoples cannot reconcile when one demands control over the other, when one refuses to treat the other as a partner in peace, when one uses the logic of power rather than the power of logic. Israel has yet to understand that it cannot have peace while denying justice. As long as the occupation of Palestinian lands continues, as long as Palestinians are denied freedom, then the path to the "peace of the brave" that I embarked upon with my late partner Yitzhak Rabin, will be littered with obstacles. The Palestinian people have been denied their freedom for far too long and are the only people in the world still living under foreign occupation. How is it possible that the entire world can tolerate this oppression, discrimination and humiliation? The 1993 Oslo Accord, signed on the White House lawn, promised the Palestinians freedom by May 1999. Instead, since 1993, the Palestinian people have endured a doubling of Israeli settlers, expansion of illegal Israeli settlements on Palestinian land and increased restrictions on freedom of movement. How do I convince my people that Israel is serious about peace while over the past decade Israel intensified the colonization of Palestinian land from which it was ostensibly negotiating a withdrawal? But no degree of oppression and no level of desperation can ever justify the killing of innocent civilians. I condemn terrorism. I condemn the killing of innocent civilians, whether they are Israeli, American or Palestinian; whether they are killed by Palestinian extremists, Israeli settlers, or by the Israeli government. But condemnations do not stop terrorism. To stop terrorism, we must understand that terrorism is simply the symptom, not the disease.


The personal attacks on me currently in vogue may be highly effective in giving Israelis an excuse to ignore their own role in creating the current situation. But these attacks do little to move the peace process forward and, in fact, are not designed to. Many believe that Ariel Sharon, Israel's prime minister, given his opposition to every peace treaty Israel has ever signed, is fanning the flames of unrest in an effort to delay indefinitely a return to negotiations. Regrettably, he has done little to prove them wrong. Israeli government practices of settlement construction, home demolitions, political assassinations, closures and shameful silence in the face of Israeli settler violence and other daily humiliations are clearly not aimed at calming the situation.

The Palestinians have a vision of peace: it is a peace based on the complete end of the occupation and a return to Israel's 1967 borders, the sharing of all Jerusalem as one open city and as the capital of

two states, Palestine and Israel. It is a warm peace between two equals enjoying mutually beneficial economic and social cooperation. Despite the brutal repression of Palestinians over the last four decades, I believe when Israel sees Palestinians as equals, and not as a subjugated people upon whom it can impose its will, such a vision can come true. Indeed it must. Palestinians are ready to end the conflict. We are ready to sit down now with any Israeli leader, regardless of his history, to negotiate freedom for the Palestinians, a complete end of the occupation, security for Israel and creative solutions to the plight of the refugees while respecting

Israel's demographic concerns. But we will only sit down as equals and not as supplicants; as partners, not as subjects; as seekers of a just and peaceful solution, not as a defeated nation grateful for whatever scraps are thrown our way. For despite Israel's overwhelming military advantage, we possess something even greater: the power of justice.

Yasir Arafat was elected president of the Palestinian Authority in 1996 and is also chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization.



REMEMBERING ALEX GUNASEKERA

Gananath Obeyesekere

I was saddened to hear of the recent death of Alex (U.A.) Gunasekera. In the early sixties when we were young lecturers at Peradeniya Alex, Sarathchandra and I were close friends. We were a kind of trio, all three interested at the time in varied aspects of Sinhala society and traveled to many areas of the Western and Southern provinces to study communal and exorcistic rituals. Alex also helped Sarathchandra in his research on folk theatre and me in my work on the Goddess Pattini. He was a great companion and those who knew him will remember his wonderful witticisms and his hearty full-throated laughter. He was an enormously erudite person not only in the field of anthropology but also in the Indic literature in which he was nurtured. His research speciality was the Kandyan period social organization and over the years he amassed a large amount of material both from Sinhala sources and from the colonial archives. But he was a perfectionist unable to put down in writing what he had so painstakingly garnered.

Alex studied oriental languages in the University of Ceylon at Colombo, worked for many years as the ethnologist of the Colombo Museum and published many important articles in the Museum journal, *Spolia Zeylanica*. He combined his knowledge of Indic languages with social anthropology when he studied that subject at Oxford with one of the giants of the disciplines Sir E.E. Evans Pritchard who was both his teacher and friend. He returned to Sri Lanka with a Master's degree and in addition to his museum responsibilities he was also a visiting lecturer in Sociology at Peradeniya during the late sixties and early seventies. Senior scholars in sociology and social anthropology such as S. J. Tambiah and Ralph Pieris were his friends. There were also many others no doubt within and outside of academia. Alex was a caring teacher who became friends with his students some of whom are now senior professors and lecturers at Peradeniya and Vidyodaya where he also taught for some time. He resigned from Vidyodaya and went to live in Oxford where he lectured at the Oxford Polytechnic (now a University) till his retirement a few years ago. He was a very close friend of the late Lalith Atulathmudali, whom he knew at Oxford. Politics, however, was not his forte and while he was loyal to his political friends he was distressed with the degradation of the nation's political life and its drastic turn to political violence that resulted, among other things, in Atulathmudali's tragic death, an event that affected him deeply.

Alex suffered a serious stroke in his apartment at Oxford but he recovered after some time owing to his fortitude and his creative use of Buddhist meditation. At Oxford his friend, the Buddhist scholar, Richard Gombrich and his wife Sanjukta, were a source of support. I met him many times in England when visiting there and always when he came to Sri Lanka. The first stroke did not get him down; he spoke to me of his plans to publish his massive collection of documents on the social organization of the late Kandyan kingdom. But this was not to be; he had another, a more serious stroke, over a year ago when he was in Sri Lanka. He was bedridden and paralyzed, unable to speak. I found it traumatic to see him in that state; the vibrant being whom I knew so well, now helpless and perhaps unable to recognize people. Seeing him in that state is one of those nightmares I have to live with; and it must be especially so for the loved ones who cared for him through those long days and nights. Alex's illness ought to make us realize that there comes a time when death must be welcomed; there is a time to live and a time to die. And because that strong voice and infectious laughter has been stilled and because Alex left an uncompleted project I can only hope that some younger scholar will recover his research material and write it up as a living tribute to him.

I do not think Alex was a conventionally religious person. Yet, like many other intellectuals of his generation, such as his friend Sarathchandra, he strongly identified himself with the tolerant and compassionate world view of the Buddhist doctrinal tradition. I cannot imagine him comfortable with religious platitudes. Yet, Sri Lankan convention demands that when one writes an obituary of a friend, a fellow scholar and rare human being one must say something about death and what might lie beyond. Now that death has laid his cold hand on him I can only hope that any *prarthanas* that Alex made while he was living be realized in whatever afterlife that he wished for himself. And may his son and daughter and his grandchildren, in their differing ways, be inspired in their own lives by Alex's legacy as a scholar, a thinker and a Buddhist humanist. For, as the female sage Diotima said in Plato's *Symposium*, there is one way in which we human beings might be permitted a form of immortality, irrespective of our formal and sometimes irreconcilable religious beliefs and that is in the continuity of our lives in those of our descendants and in those whom we have loved and cared for.

