

As Is

by Erin FAGAN

The decision to hold this interview in the biology lounge was arbitrary. We didn't know that there would be a television there, or that it, like so many other TVs this past week, would be showing live coverage of the terrorist attacks in America. In fact, we found ourselves watching a CNN interview with Colin Powell, headlined under the rhetorical caption, "America's New War."

This is an entirely unplanned irony, considering that we have come here to talk about the events on Tuesday and their aftermath. Like everyone else, we have been stunned, saddened, and scared. We, like everyone else, are finding ourselves anxious about the future. Sobia Ali, however, has personal anxieties along with all of the other emotions that she has experienced with this tragedy.

"A friend told me at work," she says, "At first I thought it was an accident, but then I heard about a second plane. . . I didn't believe it at first."

Sobia was born in Saskatchewan, and has lived here on Prince Edward Island for most of her life. Her parents, however, were born in Pakistan, a neighbouring country of Afghanistan and the focus of a new, global campaign against the suspected terrorists behind Tuesday's attacks. She is also Muslim, and finds herself fearful for both her family in Pakistan and for people who have been and may be targeted in acts of hate throughout North America.

"My mom told me that a taxi driver in New York was murdered last night," she tells me. There have been other reports in the news of Molotov cocktails thrown at mosques, threats and beatings amidst the calls for calm and tolerance.

"I am definitely worried . . . My attention's diverted to the Muslims who are being attacked and assaulted along with what's happened in New York."

Television coverage inevitably enters our talk. This morn-

ing, while watching a ChatTV forum on a rising anti-Islamic sentiment, Sobia was impressed by one statement that a panellist made:

"Muslims are just as much like Osama Bin Laden as White Americans are like Timothy McVeigh," she quotes, adding, "Not all Muslims believe in what these terrorists have done."

"For one, Islam doesn't promote violence. . . the word *Islam* itself means peace, peaceful submission to God." She adds that there was a room set aside as a mosque for employees in one of the World Trade towers, and that they too would have been victims of the devastating, indiscriminating attacks.

Sobia relays that the producer of this ChatTV show, an African-Canadian, made several excellent points. He spoke of how white perpetrators of horrific acts are often characterized as "crazy", whereas when a black person or a Muslim commits violence, the whole community becomes marked with the responsibility.

Along with this theme, Sobia and I also note that anyone who even looks Arab or is brown-skinned may

be identified with terrorist threat in the minds of a few. There are, of course, precedents for this phenomenon, such as with the discrimination against Japanese North Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbour.

"There are no excuses...it (fear) is not a reason to attack kids," she adds, referring to assaults upon a few children in Toronto.

"The media's probably been scaring us a lot. . . the majority would not, of course, believe in it (attacking Muslims/Arabs in North America)."

Sobia has found some of the media coverage, particularly that from the United States, to be somewhat sensationalised and fixated upon the possible Islamic aspect of the terrorist attacks.

"Maybe if they left the word Islam out of accusations," she suggests, "They immediately blamed Arabs. . . forgetting about the actual tragedy, focussed on politics. . . it seems really biased." Echos of the immediate aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing spring to mind.

The event has caused Sobia to reflect upon her identity as a Canadian, minority citizen and as a

resident of PEI.

"Growing up here. . . it was fine. We had a pretty big society growing up. . . a sense of community. I've never experienced any sort of prejudice or hate (on PEI)."

"But just now, when you think about it, it also makes me think what its like to be a Canadian minority. . . (it feels like) us versus them."

In addition to fears for people in North America, Sobia also finds herself wondering about her extended family in Pakistan. At this time, there is word that Pakistan has been asked by the US for help.

"It's a tough situation. . . if they don't (cooperate with the US), they could possibly be targeted. They (the government) could also be targeted by the Taliban," she speculates, "The whole situation is. . . insane."

As for what the US government might do in the coming days, Sobia would love to see a relatively peaceful solution.

"I'd like to see them (America) wait a little bit . . .", she says, adding her fear that any hasty actions might only cause more violence, particularly if any mistakes are made in the process.

After the formal interview is over, Sobia, another friend, and I talk about how the world might change from here and whether or not those changes will be positive or negative for future international relations. One consensus among us is a hope for greater understanding among different peoples in the long run. Another, grimmer consensus is best stated by one Anthropology, Biology major:

"There's no safe place anymore. You can't think of a continent where there's no major violence."

I find it noteworthy to add that, as I was leaving the lounge, an e-mail message to the CNN flashed on the screen. It said, in bold capital letters, "An eye for an eye will leave us all blind." This is one of the most valuable things that I have heard all week.

M.A.P.U.S.

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