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FREEDOM: A WORTHY CAUSE TO FIGHT FOR, BUT NOT KILL FOR

HUMAN RIGHTS APPLY TO EVERYBODY, EVERYWHERE

All South Africans who deplore hostage taking ought to be jubilant at the news of the most recent release of hostages by the Abu-Sayyaf rebels, and particularly the release of Callie and Monique Strydom.

The role of the South African Government, Libya and others in securing their release is commendable. Does it mean that we laud the “goodwill” gesture of the rebels and the imminent release of the remaining hostages? Is the Abu-Sayyaf justified in taking hostages to further its cause? Does Islam permit placing people under moral and psychological stress, by holding families and governments to ransom?

What about the silence of those organisations, which were vociferous in their condemnation about the victims of atrocities in Bosnia, Chechnya and Palestine (Israel) and who opposed the oppressive regime of the apartheid government?

Does the silence from such quarters suggest that the lives of the hostages, including the 12 evangelists, are less important than the lives of Muslims? While we may not fully understand the “struggle” of the Abu-Sayyaf, we do know that it is fighting to establish an Islamic state. The Philippines has a Christian majority of about 80%; Muslims comprise five percent of the total population.

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which had a moderate and conciliatory approach toward the government, signed an agreement in 1987 to relinquish its goal for Muslim independence. The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was formed in 1977 as a splinter group, becoming the vanguard of the Islamic movements in the Bangsamoro homeland in Mindanao and neighbouring islands. The Bangsamoro territory was annexed on July 4, 1946 when the United States (US) granted the Philippines independence.

THE FILIPINO army and its armed militias committed many atrocities against the Bangsamoro Muslims, such as massacres inside mosques and the burning of hundreds of thousands of homes, mosques and Islamic schools. The Abu-Sayyaf group originated in 1991 from the MNLF against the background of government brutality and armed violence. It operates in southern Philippines striving to establish an Islamic state on Mindanao island, which is one of the two largest islands, inhabited by a Muslim majority.

Its struggle is against the illegal usurpation of their legitimate rights for freedom and self-determination, which they enjoyed for several hundred years, having managed to evade Spanish colonialism for 300 years. The US paved the way for annexation in 1946.

Ironically, Abu-Sayyaf's violation of international human rights by resorting to kidnapping has done more injustice to its cause. It has also provided more "ammunition" to extremist Western critics of Islam to increase their bias and hatred and to make synonymous with Islam and Muslims its inhumane actions. Its action will contribute to the xenophobia and stereotyping of Muslims by certain Western journalists.

The extremist's media critics and writers like Morton Zuckerman and Martin Pertz and those who kidnap, bomb and maim have one thing in common. In an accelerated monoculturising process that is reshaping our geographical boundaries into one nation, these extremists are preventing the opportunities for "dialogue" between religious groups.

They are deepening the polarity by their zealous actions. This also has serious implications for Muslims in South Africa, who are part of the changing milieu and faced by the challenges of nation building.

It is the duty of every Muslim who subscribes to the teachings of the Qur'an and exemplary life of Prophet Muhammad (God's blessings and peace be upon him), to struggle against oppression and to establish basic human rights for all. The right to freedom of expression and safety and security for a Muslim is as sacred a right as that of a Jew, Christian, Hindu or an atheist, embedded in the shari'ah (Islamic law).

To serve God Almighty and to worship Him, a Muslim is required to serve humanity unconditionally and selflessly, as taught by the Prophet. The actions of the Abu-Sayyaf undermine this fundamental principle. Sri Swami

Sivananda, in his short essay on Islam, states: "Islam teaches that God has sent Prophets and religious teachers to mankind to bring them to the path of goodness, to teach them the noble things of life, to be kind, to be noble, to be merciful, to be good and to be just. Islam teaches to regard not only human beings with kindness and tolerance, but also to treat animals with kindness; the beauty of Islam is marred by the un-Islamic behaviour of some of its followers". The subjecting of civilians, local or foreign, to "political" imprisonment is most certainly un-Islamic. There is no basis for it in any religion.

All of us ought to share or at least attempt to share to some degree the mental, physical and psychological anguish of Callie and Monique Strydom, their families and other hostages should make us feel not only happy, but also triumphant.

The Strydoms and other hostages were denied their basic right to freedom, caged as it were like animals. The Abu-Sayyaf may have gained financially and militarily, but their actions will further marginalize religion in society.

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