
Interview: Dr. Chandra Muzaffar



The consequences of usury are felt at the level of human beings

Dr. Chandra, who heads the organization Just World Trust, was interviewed by EIR's Umberto Pascali on Jan. 31 in Pinang, Malaysia.

EIR: You are head of the Malaysian human rights organization, Just World Trust. What is your background?

Chandra: By academic training, I am a political scientist. I obtained my degrees from the University of Singapore in the late '60s and early '70s. I taught at this university, then the Science University of Malaysia (in English) from 1970 until 1983, when I quit teaching for nine years; I returned to teaching back here, to the University of Pinang, a year-and-a-half ago. During the nine-year break from teaching, I helped to found and was president of a local public interest group, Aliran. Translated into English, Aliran means National Consciousness Movement. It was concerned with issues pertaining to human rights, democracy, accountability, and so on, within the Malaysian setting.

But I discovered the last two or three years that while these issues were important within the Malaysian context and people should continue talking about them, there was also a need to talk about some of these issues—like human rights, accountability, the nature of development, where we are going—at the global level. The Gulf war was a turning point, because I could see that what was emerging from the ruins of the politics of the Cold War; what was emerging from the end of the era of East-West confrontation, was basically a global system where one superpower and its allies were going to dictate and determine everything. And I realized that this was going to be very very dangerous, and I looked at very specific challenges in different parts of the world. One could see what was happening in Iraq. One could also see from this perspective what was happening in Palestine; in South Africa, Somalia, the Sudan, everywhere.

There was a need for some sort of a response to this more global challenge. And this is why some friends and I got together and set up this new group called Just World Trust, which is, unlike Aliran, directed toward global issues, not Malaysian issues. We are concerned with issues of global domination and the sort of response that is needed to this global domination. We held two forums at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in June last year—a confer-

ence that was a great disappointment. One forum was an attempt to see if there was a southern-northern divide on human rights, which we were convinced had to be addressed. The second forum was called "Islam and the West: Human Rights in the 21st Century." We wanted to look at how Muslims, Christians, and others could work together toward common understanding of human responsibility into the next century.

In Geneva, in the end, it was basically those powerful countries trying to get what they wanted out of the conference. They didn't succeed totally, but they managed to get quite a bit of what they wanted. You had, of course, governments sometimes insisting on positions which, to my mind, didn't make much sense both in the North and the South, but just trying to defend their own terms, using whatever arguments: sometimes its sovereignty, the question of non-interference. But you also had governments in the North, talking about human rights from a very narrow angle, basically civil and political rights of a very individualized type without a larger notion of economic-social-cultural rights, without a notion of collective rights, without fundamental rights in the global, international system.

EIR: You seem to be addressing human rights from a different perspective than, for example, Amnesty International, or the rest of that ilk.

Chandra: Definitely. There is currently a very unjust global system. There are violations committed with this unjust global system—violations which are perpetrated by powerful global actors. There are not many human rights groups that want to address this issue—and that includes Amnesty International. They are not prepared to address this issue at all. Amnesty International parades the world stage as the world's leading human rights advocate, but if you look at its understanding of human rights, it's very, very narrow. It just confines itself to civil and political rights, often individual type, most of the time at the level of a nation-state. It doesn't look at the global dimension.

What is this global dimension in relation to human rights? When 625,000 infants die across three continents as a result of unfair debt servicing, because poor countries are forced to service debts—debts which should not be there any more,

except for the way in which the IMF [International Monetary Fund] imposes debt regimes upon poor countries—because the very powerful actors in the international financial system have decided that countries that have actually paid their debts along time ago, they are to go on paying them because of the way in which interest rates are manipulated; this is what it is. It is classical usury. The consequences of that are felt at the level of the human being. These are human rights violations; they are more fundamental than the violation of the right to free speech; babies get killed; innocent human beings get killed, because you can't look after your own babies; you can't look after your children; you just have to service your debt—75% of your national income goes into debt servicing, which is terrible. This is a human rights issue. Has Amnesty ever taken this up? Have others taken this up and said it is a major human rights violation? They don't talk about this.

Someone gets arrested somewhere, detention without trial. I'm not saying these things are not important; they are, but they get very worked up over these things. Six hundred twenty-five thousand infants die across three continents: This is a Unicef figure from 1985. In the Philippines, a child dies every hour as a result of debt servicing—every hour. These are real human rights issues.

According to certain U.N. sources, as a result of some of the very unfair economic policies of the North, including policies which are designed basically to protect their own interests—whether it's in trade, technology, investments and so on—and if you look at their policies in the area of international finance, it has been argued that as a result of all these policies, the South loses as much as \$500 billion in monetary terms, as far as trade is concerned. In other words, if you freed all those blockages, the South would benefit to the tune of \$500 billion as far as trade is concerned. And it has been calculated that as a result of all of this, the impact upon human beings is something like 15 million people die in the South, because of unfair economic policies at the global level.

EIR: Do you see other countries following the lead of Just World Trust, who are interested in putting human rights on this level?

Chandra: There is concern among governments in the South and some groups in the North, with this larger understanding of human rights. But many governments dare not speak out, because they are in no position to speak out. They are either indebted to the North, they owe them a lot of money, or they are controlled by the IMF/World Bank: They are afraid they will be punished in some way. But the unfortunate thing is that at the level of citizens' groups in the South, few of them talk about these things. On the contrary, you find that many of the human rights groups in the South adopt an approach to human rights that is very much like what Amnesty and the others want—civil and political rights of a very narrow type, without linking it to the larger issues. We

have to deal with this problem.

Look at the political dimension of human rights at the global level. Look at the hundreds of thousands who have died in Iraq in the last three years, as a result of this unfair imposition of economic sanctions—isn't that a human rights issue? Are these human rights groups talking about this? They are not. Look at Somalia. Look at the propaganda against Sudan, which has got no basis at all. This is again part of the game. And for a long long time we've had the problem of Palestine—gross violations of human rights—for decades. And today, you find even within this narrow definition of human rights that they are used to, there are very serious violations taking place in countries which happen to be allies of powerful actors of the North. They are not highlighting these things. Look at what is happening in Saudi Arabia: Human rights violations are taking place there—people are arrested, detained, tortured—not to talk about Kuwait, not to talk about Egypt.

EIR: You mentioned before you are seeking unity with forces in the North who are fighting the same battle. How do you see your perspective in contrast to the political movement of Lyndon LaRouche?

Chandra: The issues we are addressing, whether Iraq, or Sudan, or Palestine, also the economic issues that I talked about; they are also issues, if my memory serves me well, that LaRouche and his friends have been very concerned about. I don't expect us to agree on everything; we are the products of different historical circumstances; we operate from different places. One area which offers hope for meaningful cooperation . . . what is significant, is that the LaRouche movement is also very concerned about is the role of spiritual and moral values in the transformation of the global system. If I am correct about this, the LaRouche movement is one of the very few movements in the western world that is talking about the role of Christianity, understood and interpreted in a very universal manner, in a very global, universal, ecumenical manner, the role of Christianity in social transformation. The LaRouche movement is also very concerned, as we are, with the position of the human being as the trustee of God, as the viceregent of God; viceregent is the term that is used I think in Islam, but it's a universal term: the viceregent of God, the trustee of God. Viceregent is someone who deputizes for God, as it were, in the image of God—the kind of notion that you are here to play a certain role, to fulfill a certain mission, a very noble mission of a human being. It elevates the human being to a sublime level.

I think what we have done in the last 200 years, in particular, the so-called post-Enlightenment period, we have really deprecated the human being. We have really downgraded and degraded the human being. What is beautiful about the human being: that divine spark, which is so much a part of all our spiritual traditions. This is something that we have tried to snuff out—that divine spark. This is one of the great

In the last 200 years, the so-called post-Enlightenment period, we have really deprecated the human being. What is beautiful about the human being: that divine spark, which is so much a part of all our spiritual traditions. This is something that we have tried to snuff out—that divine spark. This is one of the great injustices that the last 200 years has done to humankind.

injustices that the last 200 years, in particular, have done to humankind as a whole. . . .

It's very interesting that the European Enlightenment, if you look at it philosophically, was basically this notion of reason, the mind, conquering everything. But look at the same concept of enlightenment from another tradition: Look at it from the Buddhist tradition. What did enlightenment mean? It meant the light from within you. And it's the same thing in the Hindu traditions, in Islam, in Christianity—it is basically within you. So, you get enlightened, because it is the soul that gets enlightened; it is the process of becoming aware in the deepest, most profound metaphysical sense of becoming aware. Who are you? Why are you here? What is your purpose? And then, what to do with your life on the basis of that awareness; that is what is important.

We have tried to build a civilization on a very jaundiced notion of the human being, a partial, very one-sided, lopsided notion of the human being. And this is why we are in the sort of mess we are in. Thus, it is very important that groups try to develop a more holistic, integrated notion of the human being.

One of the very sad things I feel is this: We talk of human rights. You look at all the secular human rights movements, how can we talk of human rights without asking the fundamental questions—who is the human being? What is the human being here for? How can we talk of rights without relating it to this very fundamental question of why? Why the human being? Who is the human being? What is the purpose of a human being? We don't link these two things at all. This, I think, has been one of the tragedies of the way in which contemporary civilization has developed. We fragment everything. We fragment rights; not linking them to responsibilities. Rights can never exist without responsibilities; they are interlinked; they have always been interlinked.

EIR: There is the conception of the human being that is the conception that has come from the British Empire, the colonialist conception that man is like an animal, something to be exploited. . . . You have historical experience with this.

Chandra: That's right. For many of us who started schooling when the British were still around, the syllabus in school

was of course Britain's. I was seven years old at that time, when I started to go to school—the British were still around—we became independent in 1957. So there was still the colonial school system, the colonial atmosphere. But that atmosphere lasted much longer than 1957. The influence of this earlier colonial period then resurrected itself through neo-colonialism, which is with us. You see it in terms of television; you can see it in newspapers, in the attitudes of people who were not part of the colonial generation, because this is very, very powerful, what is happening now. In some ways, at the level of the mind, I think new colonial penetration of the human mind is much more powerful, more intense than what it used to do in the colonial period—not just in this country but in many other countries. It is because of the control of the media, entertainment, all these sources of influence that you can think of: education, your notion of values, everything.

But if I look at myself as an individual, and others who are my friends and so on, I've always been critical of what I'd seen as colonial and new colonial domination, for a very, very long while; it's something that I developed, I think partly because of the things I read; the teachers I had in school, my own family. My father was someone who was very concerned about all of these things; we had a lot of books at home. I remember even in my student days, I was concerned about certain issues—Vietnam, in the late '60s. I was also very concerned about things like the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. I remember as a student taking part in a demonstration in Singapore protesting against the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, writing short pieces about Vietnam, protesting against the U.S. role.

But it was the Gulf war that made things very clear to some of us here; it was a turning point. I had been concerned about Malaysia and so on; it was clear that one had to re-set, re-design one's priorities now. Once it became clear that we were moving into this sort of global system, it became obvious this concern had to become part of one's central focus. It was a change that took place. And I think that change took place because one could see that what was emerging was going to be very, very dangerous—that no one would be able to resist this unless good people, people with some of the values and perspectives we've been talking about, took this on as their central focus. There are a lot of people in this

country who understand this, who realize how important this type of struggle is. There are many people here, of course, who don't. If you go around talking to the ordinary professional in this country, the academic, I think many of them would not have as critical a perspective about the global system, and that's partly because of what British colonialism did to us, what it did to the mind.

If you look at the whole history of British colonialism, they have been very, very successful in this area, very subtle, very sophisticated in their approach; they give the impression that they are your friends, that they are with you. It is a matter of wonder and also regret, that of all the colonial empires of the 19th century, it is only the British who succeeded in converting their empire into a commonwealth of nations. It is amazing! What is this commonwealth? It's a meaningless entity; it is just a social club for people to get together; but it's the way in which the British have managed to exercise very subtle control. They operate on the basis of the notion of what is strategically important to them. Very subtle, very crafty, very perfidious.

What I personally regard as the next most vicious, the most pernicious effect of colonial rule upon our country—the first is, of course, how they penetrated the mind, in terms of affecting our values, our attitudes, making us see things the way they want us to see things, even if it is unjust and it is wrong. It is in their interest. I have numerous examples to support this; whether it is in education—we used their methods—the way we look at our own history, it is the way in which they have looked at our history, and we just repeat the same sort of notion of history.

It's amazing that there are Malaysians—I'll give you one very very specific example. I call this the "great myth of discovery." It is a first-class example of how colonialism has penetrated the human mind.

It is a matter of utter shame that to a lot of Malaysians today, including people in their 20s and 30s, we ask them a simple question. You go down the road with a tape recorder, you ask this question: Who is the founder of Pinang? He will tell you it was Francis Light. In 1786, this man was basically a thief, a pirate, one of those chaps who, like so many others, came to loot—somebody like Johns Hopkins; there are a whole lot of them. This man was a European trader. It is a historical fact that Francis Light, the so-called founder of Pinang, was an opium trader, a very manipulative individual who cheated the Sultan of Kedah, because Pinang was part of Kedah, the state that is in the north of Pinang. He cheated him of his right to the island of Pinang. The point I want to make is: It is a myth to say that this man discovered Pinang. Pinang was already here when he came, because it was part of the state of Kedah: It was populated; there were at least 5,000 people living on this island—Malays, Chinese, and Siamese (Thais).

The British have consistently manipulated groups one against the other. They were masters of the game of divide

and rule; that was the whole basis of the British Empire. And they did that in my country. In this multi-ethnic society, they divided the different communities; they divided the Malays from the Chinese. You didn't have that many Chinese and Indians here before the coming of the British. It was part of the overall process of building the colonial empire; they wanted to set up rubber states; they took over the tin mines; they needed people to work in these places, and they brought labor from outside. If you look at the origins of most—not all—Chinese and Indians in Malaya, these are the origins, connected with the colonial empire. Chinese and Indian immigrants were brought in by the British as part of the building of the colonial economy, for their own interests. And that's how they created the so-called multi-ethnic society. Of course, you have Chinese in small numbers before that who came on their own, for hundreds of years, who settled down; there were no ethnic problems at all; their numbers were small.

EIR: Weren't Indonesia-Malaysia once integrated?

Chandra: That's right, it was integrated. There were no boundaries like what we have today.

The boundary between Indonesia and Malaysia was drawn up by the British and the Dutch in the famous Anglo-Dutch treaty, the London treaty of 1824, that is how they divided this part of the world. This is the game they have been playing all along. They divided this area; they made societies multi-ethnic, but knowing full well that this was going to lead to tremendous instability and disharmony, because it is not easy to establish multi-ethnic societies, especially if a society becomes multi-ethnic under the impetus of colonial rule. You don't control the land yourself, and people are brought from outside; physically they may be in that country, but emotionally and psychologically they remain outside that society because of the nature of colonial rule. So, divide and rule was their game.

EIR: Is this background one of the reasons why there is so much interest among the leadership in Malaysia in what the same British are doing in Bosnia?

Chandra: Absolutely, but there are also other factors in our concern about Bosnia. The leadership is also interested in the Bosnia issue because they see it as a first-class example of western duplicity on human rights. And as you know, the Malaysian prime minister [Mahathir Mohamad] has been very concerned that the West is not honest as far as human rights are concerned. Here in Bosnia you have the grossest violation of human rights taking place in the heart of Europe, and what are you doing about it? The Malaysian government says: "Look, we have been talking all the while about double standards, about selectivity, that you are using 'human rights' for other reasons, other purposes; it's not because you are concerned about human rights." And the example we now use is Bosnia.