

PLEASURE IS ALL MINE

Living in an orphaned world



SHAH HUSAIN IMAM

LOOK what is going around! Inside the country, some of which, of course, we are lamenting our hearts out on. But that can wait for the moment, because morally we have a higher call of duty to respond to. So, what's more to the point this instant is what is and is not happening in the wider world we are living in real time.

As world citizens, we cannot irresponsibly be vicarious about others' misery; that is not in our grain either. We can only be conscientious and sympathetic. And really angry with those with power who are not using it to any better purpose than letting the things be.

Some chilling realisations are creeping in -- thanks to current media narratives about situations in many countries that do not truly reflect the brisling ground realities and the tragedies of deeper human agony playing out mostly unrecognised, being not seen through the lens of Western media. Of course, their access is somewhat circum-

scribed by the backlash to an intervention, yet they still see what they want to see through a somewhat preconceived prism. This is not to say though that Al Jazeera, BBC and CNN miss out on what might be a shade unpalatable to their audiences. Yet, what sneaks through eyewitness accounts read much more horrifying.

Take the example of Libya. The other day, a young Libyan woman in hysterical outbursts before the media as officials tried to grapple with her to silence her, vented out: "They (pro-Gaddafi forces) have taken my humanity, they stripped away my being, what am I left with, who need I be afraid of?" This is an eloquent statement on failed multilateralism mirrored on the passing of the no-fly-zone resolution by the UNSC over Libya and the manner in which it has been operated thus far. This resolution was carried through with "significant" number of abstentions. What was so "significant" about the abstentions, even in terms of pulling a moral weight against the resolution? Nothing at all; for while China and Russian Federation, as permanent members of the Security Council, have the veto power, neither of the two applied it. Therefore, they are to

blame for disserving the UN cause in Libya. The continuing civil war and the enforcement of no-fly-zone ironically through bombardment are exacting an incalculable humanitarian cost that would be difficult to recompense. The scale of internal displacement and external exodus not just in and from Libya

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But from some other neighbouring countries as well is beyond the capacity of IMO, UNHCR and Red Crescent Society to cope. Even though they are doing their best but given the complexities, ramifications and escalatory nature of the crisis these bodies are faced with an uphill task.

In Egypt, Mubarak exiled by the Shatel Arab must be savouring a recall of his prophesy that if he were to quit power at a particular junc-

ture, the country would plunge into chaos, even though his desperate counsel was a ploy to bide time to consign his ill-gotten riches to safety. Egypt has got itself an interim constitution under which political parties, barring the Mubarak vintage, are free to participate in parliamentary and presiden-

tial elections. But the old guards in the military still breathe down the neck of the radicals. Furthermore, the secular character of popular aspirations is under threat of a fundamentalist surge which has found a well-accepted sale point in religious messages as far as the broadcasting media in some parts of the country goes.

In Ivory Coast, Laurent Ghagbo has vowed to fight to the bitter end despite being holed up in the base-

ment of a presidential palace and his earlier intent to negotiate surrender before Alassane Outtara, the winner in the election. The latter has the support of the UN which has a peacekeeping presence there. The country is fraught with a civil war as both sides fight with break-away ragtag armies, each with its sectarian agenda. The tragedy is the UN has no mandate to disarm the feuding troops. Look what has happened in Congo in the last three decades; the country is plunged in a civil war, again because the UN Peacekeeping Force has no mandate to disarm the fighting forces and enforce ceasefire!

The power hungry and long-serving elected and unelected leaders are an endangered species. Thanks to the tectonic slippage of grounds under their feet triggered by popular uprisings to break loose of stifling authoritarianism.

The trend is not confined to the Green Crescent alone. It is getting global. The two-term serving Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero, sensing disenchantment with his people, has made clear that he would not stand for the third term. Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega's express intent to seek reelection even in far-away

November is resented by his people who have taken the issue to the street.

These are all wholesome trends but the multipolar world is too indecisive to steer the wind of change to fruition, an outcome that would make the world a better place to live in. World leaders need to think big, and think fast to evolve an effective mechanism for change.

But what the world misses out on are the likes of Bertrand Russell and Andre Marlaux who were the conscientious objectors we could latch on to in times of human crisis to draw strength from their voice of reason. This breed is no more. What is even worse, this inadequacy is compounded by another feeing of void: Whereas there is no dearth of green movements for protestations to save environment, or want of public outcries before G-8, World Economic Summit, Conference of Parties on climate change voicing concerns over state of economic, social and developmental justice, yet what is glaringly absent from the scene is any civil society-led movement in the world capitals demanding political justice for all. It is time somebody took the lead there.

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The writer is Associate Editor, The Daily Star.

Japan's nuclear crisis: Genesis of a catastrophe

PETER CUSTERS

IT is humanly difficult to accept. Yet the worst fears nuclear opponents have voiced for years are becoming true in the nuclear disaster unfolding in Japan. End March, we were almost three weeks into the catastrophe at Fukushima-Daiichi that began on the 11th. Within days it was apparent that the country was likely to face a massive problem of radiation, with the concomitant risks of increased cancer deaths for Japan's population.

Now, as the failure of the nuclear complex's owner, Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), to timely reestablish the functioning of the cooling systems in all four damaged reactors is all too apparent, there is an increasing likelihood that the crisis will turn into an international catastrophe. Thus, according to European nuclear experts, a massive bubble of melted fuel rods and metal has probably formed on the bottom of nuclear reactor no.3. Coincidentally, it is precisely this reactor where plutonium has been used as a part of mixed, uranium-plutonium, fuel rods.

Plutonium is the most toxic element on earth. Even digestion or inhalation of minuscule quantities is likely to cause lung, bone and liver cancer in humans. Experts disagree over whether the lava-type boiling bubble could seek its way through the concrete socle of the reactor. It is also possible that the bubble will leak sideways. Already, extremely high levels of radiation have been registered in the turbine hall of one of the reactors, and in samples taken from the nearby sea. No less alarming: plutonium has been traced at four or five different spots in the soil near the complex.

Further, as the nuclear crisis deepens and slowly takes on an Armageddon shape, soul-searching is slowly starting over the lack of foresight of Japan's policymakers. First, it is well known that Japan is a nation prone to earthquakes and tsunamis. The very word tsunami is a Japanese word, and the capital Tokyo has repeatedly been visited by major earthquakes in history. Further, the huge tsunami floods that were thrown up in the past make living along the coast by nature very hazardous.

The tsunamis which ravaged Japan in 1896 and 1933 for instance,

according to Japanese geologists resulted in flood waves respectively 38 and 29 meters high. The flood waves that hit Japan's coast on March 11 did not have this towering size for sure. Yet, they were thrice as tall as the wall which had been built near the Fukushima-Daiichi complex to protect it against the effects of a potential tsunami.

When the complex was constructed, some forty years back, account was taken not of tsunamis which have previously occurred in Japan itself but of the tsunami in faraway Chili in 1956! Government guidelines on the security of nuclear reactors reportedly ignored the issue of tsunamis until 2006. Hence, the Japanese authorities have arguably provoked the nuclear disaster themselves, by ignoring the possibility that Fukushima-

Richter. Like the Fukushima nuclear plant, the Kashiwazaki complex happens to be owned by TEPCO, which is one of the largest electricity corporations worldwide.

Subsequent to the 2007 accident, TEPCO was severely criticised by the Japanese government. One of the problems it reportedly had underestimated was the problem of radioactive water leaking into the sea. Thus, blame was duly apportioned. Yet, with hindsight it is all too evident that no efforts were made -- either by TEPCO or by the Japanese government -- to rethink the country's US-inspired nuclear energy policies.

The genesis of the Fukushima disaster consists of yet a third important element. This element raises questions regarding the way the entire nuclear lobby operates --

Moreover, not only had TEPCO falsified crucial documents, Japan's nuclear security agency NISA, when it found out about the falsifications, had also kept quiet and failed to expose the truth.

The scandal triggered the temporary closure of reactor no.1 of Fukushima. It also led to repeat inspections of 16 reactors elsewhere, but not to any structural changes. Hence, Sato does not hesitate to term the present catastrophe as one induced by "lack of human prudence." The ageing of the Japan's park of nuclear reactors played its role in making accidents increasingly likely. But the lack of democracy with regard to energy-policy-making was bound to take its toll.

What lessons to draw from these stories on the human failures that triggered the Fukushima catastrophe? Given the huge interests that are at stake -- the power of the nuclear lobby in Japan and worldwide -- it is quite likely that policymakers will seek to apportion personal and institutional blame, so as to be able to continue with production of nuclear energy. That danger is already evident.

Thus, faced with growing public anger, the government of Japan has stated that it is considering nationalisation of TEPCO. Such a measure may serve to pre-empt bankruptcy for the institution bearing primary responsibility for the catastrophe. Yet it may easily help turn attention away from more fundamental questions which need to be posed.

Leading international critics and opponents have for years argued that full-scale ecological catastrophes, which have occurred twice in the former Soviet Union -- in the military-nuclear complex of Cheliabinsk in 1957, and in the civilian nuclear complex of Chernobyl in 1986 -- were bound to occur elsewhere sooner or later.

Isn't it time the wisdom of continuing with nuclear energy be radically questioned? To restate Fukushima's provisional lesson for the world: nuclear production is inherently hazardous, and corporate owners profiting from the sale of nuclear energy have an inherent interest in belittling the risks.

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The writer is International Correspondent for The Daily Star.
www.petercusters.nl

8 dead people who aren't dead



Nury Vittachi

A teenage friend looked up from her computer. "Jim Carrey's dead!" she gasped.

Shocked, we gathered around to read the sad news about the movie comedian. Then we learned it was not true: Carrey was alive. That was March 2.

A week later, Internet news flashes said Adam Sandler and Jaden Smith had died. Again we grieved. But they were also false.

Last week, my young surfer friend said: "Charlie Sheen's been found dead in his house!" This was greeted by an uncomfortable silence. No one actually said: "Hooray."

We're all too well bred for that sort of thing. But there was a fair bit of spontaneous dancing.

Nevertheless, our reactions were irrelevant: it was again untrue. Walking dead people are dominating the news just now. A man recently returned to his family 12 years after his funeral, according to a cutting sent by a reader.

After sending Kweku Anokye of Ghana to hospital, his family was told "the authorities had discharged some patients and killed the rest." (That's how they make bed space, I suppose.) Since he didn't turn up at home, his folks assumed he was dead. No doubt they grieved long and hard, with passionate cries of "Oh, well."

A dozen years later the hospital people decided the guy was ready to be discharged (ah, now I see why they have a bed shortage).

Local media reported last week: "He is now facing difficulties integrating into the community of Akyem Bomo because a lot of people think he is a ghost."

I feel sorry for Kweku. Can you imagine the conversations he has?

"So, what's it like being

dead?"

"Ask me one more time and you'll find out for yourself." There's a similar case in India at the moment. The family of Sital Singh Bagi, 70, declared him dead and claimed his pension.

When he returned home, they decided they'd rather have the money than him. He has spent 12 years trying to persuade people he is alive. This happens so often in India that there is now an Association of Dead People, who meet and have odd conversations.

"Hi. How long have you been dead?"

"Fourteen years. You?"

People in Japan are so polite that walking dead people feel guilty for not being dead.

After Shoichi Yokoi emerged from a cave where he had been hiding from World War II for decades, he stepped off a plane in Tokyo and said: "It is with much embarrassment that I have returned alive."

Discussing the walking dead reminds me of the CNN obituary glitch of 2003. The news group accidentally put some odd obits on the internet. Dick Cheney, former US vice president, was described as "the UK's favorite grandmother." The Pope was listed as a fan of horse racing and his story was headlined "life as Queen Consort."

The editors claimed the obits were unedited templates, but my theory is that they contain shocking truths that cannot be printed until the individuals are dead.

Anyway, the hot news is that a movie is to be made about the life of the founder of the Association of Dead People.

After he was declared officially dead, Lal Bihari (picture above) changed his name to Lal Bihari Deceased and signed letters "the late Mr Bihari."

The authorities have now agreed he's alive. I suggest they call the movie The Life and Death and Life of Lal Bihari Deceased. When he finally does die, they'll have to put something unusual on his tombstone.

"Dead. Again?!"

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