

Apocalypse now?



NADIA KABIR BARB

HAVE you ever felt as if you had woken up in an alternative reality? Or that you might be trapped in the twilight zone? For those of us

who are self-proclaimed sci-fi geeks, it would probably be the most plausible explanation. For others, it may just feel like being the silent participant in an ongoing nightmare. How else do we explain the current state of the world that we live in? If there are any aliens out there trying to make contact (with hostile intentions), it would be advisable for them to wait it out as we are already well on our way towards economic, political, social and environmental self-destruction.

There are currently more than 65.6 million people worldwide who, due to violence, persecution or war, have been displaced and forced to leave their homes. Of these people, 22.5 million are refugees and 10 million are stateless people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment and freedom of movement (UNHCR). The figures are unprecedented and unconscionable. It begs the question whether we, as a society, have become so desensitised to the suffering of fellow human beings that apart from paying lip service and going through the motions of expressing condemnation and horror, we have nothing else to offer.

We need look no further than Bangladesh's neighbour, Myanmar, to see the effects of religious and racial discrimination. The horrors that the Rohingya Muslims have, and are still facing are unimaginable with villages being razed to the ground, systematic rape of women by the Myanmar military, babies being burnt alive and men



and children being slaughtered. The victimisation of this ethnic minority has resulted in the exodus of almost 650,000 Rohingya who have crossed the border from Rakhine state to escape. This combined with the existing Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh brings the total number to approximately 900,000. This represents a significant burden for a country with one-third of the population living below the poverty line but, given the circumstances, it was the right thing to do.

But apart from a proverbial slap on the wrist, no action has been taken by the international community. Some countries have provided aid towards the crisis but nothing else has been done to help alleviate the suffering of the affected and no sanctions imposed to discourage or hold the Myanmar military accountable. In our alternative reality, we obviously have not learned from the consequences of historical genocides such as the Holocaust, Rwanda, Cambodia, Darfur, Bosnia to name but a few. Even if action were taken now, it would still be "too little too late" for the victims of what appears to be another deliberate, calcu-

lated and racially motivated act of genocide. Europe could also take a leaf out of Bangladesh's book and re-evaluate their position on the Syrian refugee crisis which has been unfolding over the last few years.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, with Donald Trump at the helm of the United States, the political and economic scenario could not be more different than it was under the enlightened but hamstrung Barack Obama. Bellacose and bombastic speeches under the slogan "America first" or making "America great again", given during his campaign and repeated subsequent to becoming president, seem to have resonated with his supporters and enabled a form of nationalism that rejects globalisation and free trade. However, this version of America is insular, xenophobic and regressive.

Far from taking the country forward, the President of the United States appears to have taken the country on a journey back in time to an era where racism, sexism and bigotry were part of the social landscape. His appeal is that he is an outsider notionally campaigning for those who were left behind by

globalisation. The fact that he is an erratic billionaire whose achievements to date are a litany of failures gets lost in the posturing.

Over the last year, the world has watched in astonishment at the extraordinary antics of Trump. His most recent action has been to jeopardise peace in the Middle East by unilaterally recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in an uncalled-for act almost designed to cause maximum disruption. During his presidency, he has managed to antagonise his neighbours by trying and failing to get Mexico to build or pay for a wall; trigger a trade war with China; consort with Russians alleged to have meddled in the election; indulge in racism and ignorant oratory which incites religious discrimination; reduce taxes on corporations and the rich; tried (and manifestly failed) to bully the tiny but resolutely defiant nuclear rogue nation that is North Korea. He has also been accused by at least 15 women of sexual harassment and sexual assault and been caught on tape making lewd and derogatory remarks about women. Despite the above, in this twilight

zone-esque scenario, he is somehow still the President of the United States.

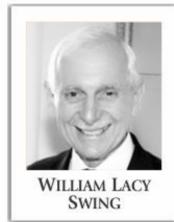
Unfortunately for the planet, Donald Trump is also a climate change sceptic. With more and more countries pledging to combat global warming and protecting the environment, the United States has not only pulled out of the 2015 Paris Agreement but has also taken climate change out of its National Security Strategy. France and Germany have stated they will make up for the shortfall generated by the US withdrawing from the agreement. Even China, the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases (the USA is the second) is actively committed to reducing their carbon footprint by launching an emissions trading system—one of the largest mechanisms in the world. In the last 20 years, Honduras, Myanmar and Haiti have been identified as the most affected countries with Nicaragua, the Philippines, and Bangladesh following closely. The sad reality is that it is the poorer and less developed countries that have actually done the least to cause global warming, that will be the ones suffering the most. China, North America and Europe will fare far better despite being responsible to a large extent for the current state of the environment. To put things in context, a three foot rise in sea level would submerge 20 percent of the country and displace almost 30 million people in Bangladesh. This is a reality that no one should have to face.

There is always the hope that one can wake up from this nightmare or do a Rip Van Winkle and sleep it out and by then somehow the world will have righted itself. However, unless something is done or we all collectively take a stance, it is more likely that we will awaken to a post-apocalyptic world given that both Trump and Kim Jong Un have their fingers on the nuclear buzzer.

Nadia Kabir Barb is a writer and columnist. Her book *Truth or Dare* has recently been published by Bengal LightsBooks.

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Our rite of passage should be safe migration, not leaky boats



WILLIAM LACY SWING

"I'm a migrant, but didn't have to risk my life on a leaky boat or pay traffickers. Safe migration cannot be limited to the global elite." Thus spoke United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres in September 2017.

With a memorable turn of phrase, he captured what is perhaps one of the overriding challenges facing the world today. While we live at a time when a privileged elite considers global mobility virtually its birthright, it is denied to countless others trapped in hopelessly bad economic or conflict circumstances.

But something else has changed to bring this self-evident reality into the grinding gears of global politics with often tragic consequences.

Not long ago a sort of insider/outsider code-of-conduct meant that what the elite got barely mattered to the global poor, who were only dimly aware of the opportunities to reach a better life beyond the confines of their country's borders. That was then.

Today, the world's greatest leveller, the smartphone—which now is in the hands of more than 2 billion across the world—continues to change all that. In less than a decade, smartphones have provided many outsiders with intimate knowledge of heretofore "elite" goings on.

What's happening is that two coexisting, if starkly diverging realities are clashing on the same planet, turning the hitherto somnolent politics of many countries unpredictable—and, indeed, volatile.

On the one hand, freedom of movement is



A dinghy carrying refugees crosses the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos on November 10, 2015. PHOTO: ARIS MESSINIS/AFP

virtually guaranteed for a privileged and surprisingly broad global citizenry, for whom it has become natural to move safely, freely and relatively inexpensively around the world. This includes tourists, students, visiting family members, migrant workers from the global south (over 2 million Filipinos and 1 million Sri Lankans etc.) as well as the businesspersons who keep our globalised world humming.

What we so easily forget in the discourse about migration is that millions are travelling in ever greater numbers. They move safely and in an orderly way, passing through security on the way to the gate, checking Facebook feeds and instant messages as they go. Above all, they move in a regular way, with passports (and visas)

in hand.

So why, one might ask, has migration become such a toxic issue, leading the news headlines and providing fuel for political populism?

Part of the answer may well lie in our brushing over the challenges of integration and being too quick to judge popular hostility towards migration as irrational or worse. Politicians ignore the values people adhere to at their peril.

Equally, if uninterrupted, global mass movements of people are seen to be so orderly, normal and beneficial for all that they do not draw comment, we will need to figure out how to cope with the majority denied mobility because of circumstances.

Hundreds of millions who are not part of the

growing, truly global labour talent market find themselves outside looking in, and looking onto a world they can only dream of. They face enormous income disparities and hardships and no chance of getting a visa or a work permit.

It comes as no surprise then that vast armies of hopeful young migrants want to climb aboard the "leaky boats" referred to by the Secretary General. Pushed by lack of economic opportunity, often exacerbated by climate change, they too are vulnerable to the siren song of social media.

That's where smuggling networks, human traffickers and modern-day enslavers ply their trade these days with complete impunity. These cruel deceptions go unchecked, as the social media giants chase new markets in the global south.

This is the type of migration that we see on the news and that at its worst has led to the shocking reality—first revealed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—of African migrants being sold as slaves and indentured servants. As population growth and economic failure drive migrants to throw caution to the wind and leave their homes, the inevitable result is populism at the receiving end where communities are also struggling with unemployment and identity issues.

This is why I place so much hope in a global compact for migration, expected to

be adopted at the end of 2018. It will be negotiated by member states under the auspices of the United Nations and aims to address international migration in a comprehensive manner. The first planned inter-governmental agreement of its kind, it crucially is not expected to intrude on nation state sovereignty nor be legally binding, probably just as well given the tinderbox nature of the subject matter.

There is a great deal of existing common ground and it hinges on the understanding that migration isn't so much a problem to be solved as a human reality to be managed. If we stop to think about the strict and mandatory rules which enable over 34.5 million flights per year that enable the equivalent of 44 percent of the world's population to take off and land safely, it should be possible to find some common rules in order to allow many more to travel, migrate and return home freely and safely. We need to offer hope to those facing economic despair, to provide legal pathways for more migrants or circular migration options for those who wish to work and return home. Because if we don't come up with solutions the smugglers will do it for us, at great cost to human life and to the fabric of our societies.

William Swing is the Director General of IOM, the UN Migration Agency.

Courtesy: Inter Press Service

QUOTABLE Quote

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ
Egyptian writer who won the 1988 Nobel Prize for Literature

You can tell whether a man is clever by his answers. You can tell whether a man is wise by his questions.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Disrobe
- 5 Den denizen
- 9 Central
- 11 High-strung
- 12 Elbows on the table
- 13 Solemn promises
- 14 Outback bird
- 15 Ornamental molding
- 17 Waiter's job
- 19 Squealer
- 20 Rental contract
- 21 Decimal base
- 22 Intent look
- 24 Lush
- 26 Brainiacs, typically
- 29 Parrot or puppy
- 30 Small songbirds
- 32 Wooden grid
- 34 Catch some z's
- 35 Once more
- 36 Act part
- 38 Shows lack of interest
- 39 Rich cake
- 40 Blinds piece
- 41 Stocking stuffers

DOWN

- 1 Singing voice, in slang
- 2 Tooth layer
- 3 Guarantee
- 4 Permit
- 5 Noggin
- 6 Whole
- 7 Depth charge, in slang
- 8 Stopwatch button
- 10 Intolerant sort
- 11 Went fast
- 16 Marine
- 18 Sweeping
- 21 Time in office
- 23 Makeup exam
- 24 Action star Steven
- 25 Canada's capital
- 27 Moolah
- 28 Meager
- 29 Theater productions
- 30 Breath mint buys
- 31 Fencing swords
- 33 Coloration
- 37 Rollaway bed

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

T A L E N T A V O N
E L I X I R S I L O
A L P I N E S K I E R
S E E K S
N A T S A I L S
G E M S S T N I C K
A P P C U E M A E
B A L S A M D I N G
L E A R S E T S
A O R T A
S N O W B O A R D E R
H E R A O R I O L E
E D G Y T E E O F F

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