

Living with fear and searching for hope



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

A boy is crying out in pain; only his head is sticking out. The rubble has trapped the rest of his body. Rescuers are trying to pull him out with their bare hands. One more day in Gaza. The year is coming to an end, but the pain is not. I change the channel, but the image persists.

With slabs of stone on his back, the head of a child looked like a turtle—an animal known for carrying its own home wherever it goes. Where will the “human animals” of Gaza go when the “lawn is being mowed” thus? The invaders want the “turtles” to move to the nearby deserts. “The life of refugees is not great, but millions of others throughout history have learnt to move on,” says my once-favourite comedic icon, Bill Maher. He referred to *Fiddlers on the Roof* to mention how the Jews took it rather sportively while being pushed from one place to another. Norman Finkelstein, my new hero, thoroughly exposed the fallacy of Maher’s claim. Finkelstein appears to be one of the few voices that resist the land-grabbing and systemic eviction, which are part of the vendetta mission triggered by the Hamas attack on October 7, which resulted in the deaths of 1,200 people. Even after the deaths of at least 21,822 Palestinians (according to Al Jazeera), there is no sign of let-up. The year 2023 will go down in history when it comes of age, leaving behind its naive understanding of liberal humanism.

Mr History has just graduated from its primary school, where it has stopped counting its fingers and colouring books with etched-out figures. All the sanitised information presented before it is beginning

to have a reality check. People are revisiting all the provided morals. Henceforth, we are reprogramming all the politics of liberal democracies. The margin is rumbling. The lexicon is growing outside the authority of Oxford or Webster. Urban Dictionary coined the term “Israeled” to explain the appropriation of something that rightfully belongs to others. It applies when someone asks you to share your belongings but then tries to exclude you. The Palestinians are touted as the new Nazis by the Israelites as they demand their land back. Earlier, we heard the Russians calling the Ukrainians Nazis as a pretext for invading their land. Words no longer simply have consequences; they now retroactively assign actions. Words do not refer to meanings anymore. They refer to the process of meaninglessness as words chase actions, and actions hide behind words.

We don't have to sugar-coat reality with metaphors. The stone slab on a child is real. The bare hands of a father and a brother are not enough to free him. If we are to move towards 2024, we need more people to lend a hand. But to join hands, we must first pull the bait out of our mouths.



Even after the deaths of nearly 22,000 Palestinians since October 7, there is no sign of let-up in Israeli offensives.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

Lucky is the man who does not use words. The cloak of fear enshrines the golden silence. Speaking up will inevitably lead to exclusion or annihilation. The fear of exclusion is so overwhelming that it extinguishes any glimmer of hope. The academy, which is supposed to be the bastion of free thoughts, no longer teaches hope. Even a country that is proud of its constitutionally protected freedom of speech cannot speak, thanks to various cash-strapped lobbies. Money gives you airtime. It decides how much you can or cannot say.

The apparent freedom on social media gives you the false security of being free. The users do not know

that they are all fish with hooked baits where the wheel-fisher will reel them in sooner or later. You can swim as much as you like, go as deep as you want, with the bait hooked in your mouth—you are never free. The angler has crafted a bait for us all. It is our human weakness to fall for bait. Adam did. Samson did. It takes a clandestine video for a politician to jump ship. A sanction on the hidden funds is what brings down the powerful. The powerful will mow down any form of dissidence, evict lands, and disperse people. It will shift battlegrounds and wage proxy wars. Someone else’s problem will become your problem. Your assets will become your liabilities. The

cheap labour which you thought of as your asset was a bait that is being pulled by those acting gods.

The year 2023 will be known as the year when we learnt to live with fear. The residue of the Ukraine war is far from over. The manipulation of the dollar rate, the food supply chain, and the oil crisis—rolled into a development democracy called Manichaeism. All these mega projects: should you be indebted or be in debt, forever? Perhaps 2024 will tell.

For now, let’s move on and get along with one little thing called an election, where you need the right number of people to show up. Numbers are a tricky game in

democracy. Human rights and global police alike frown upon ruling over the majority with the endorsement of a minority. Our candidates in this election have therefore become fruitful and multiplied. Under different guises, they hope to encourage voters to exercise their rights without fear.

But one cannot hope for the same in Palestine. Now that history has graduated, the kindergarten myth of two states is all but dispelled. If one state persists, its democracy will have to dodge the charge of apartheid. The state of Israel needs to diminish the number of indigenous Palestinians. They will follow the playbook of the Vanishing Americans in North America and Latin America. Already they cite 10/7 as their 9/11.

Hope comes in the form of human stories. Where histories fail, stories survive. One such story of survival was narrated by the provocative short film *Condom Lead* (2013). When I watched the film on Netflix, I did not know how to process the dark humour. The plot is sinister: a flat filled with balloons, representing the attempted intimacy of a couple that was disrupted by an act of Israeli aggression. Every time the couple wanted to share love, a bomb would wake up their child, and their contraceptive would remain unused. The contraceptive becomes a powerful metaphor to suggest that the Palestinians are not trying to procreate; they are just seeking an intimate, peaceful union, which is constantly being bombed on. The film ends with balloons filling up the nightly sky amid the sound of raining bombs.

After October 7, history is for grown-ups. We don’t have to sugar-coat reality with metaphors. The stone slab on a child is real. The bare hands of a father and a brother are not enough to free him. If we are to move towards 2024, we need more people to lend a hand. But to join hands, we must first pull the bait out of our mouths. And once our mouths are free, we will be able to voice out what we have been thinking all along. Happy New Year!

Celebration without fire hazards?

It's more doable than you think



Azmin Azran is a journalist at The Daily Star.

AZMIN AZRAN

Before you set off fireworks and release sky lanterns this winter, spare a thought for those with whom you share this space under the sky.

Over the years, Dhaka has had an increasingly difficult time trying to create a culture for public celebrations—for example, the Gregorian new year. Especially after a series of mishaps/crimes on New Year’s Eve, like the assault of a woman on the Dhaka University campus in 1999 or any number of road accidents that have taken place on the nights of December 31 in recent years, public perception of this global celebration has soured. It has reached a stage where police have now consistently banned public gatherings, fireworks, and flying sky lanterns on New Year’s Eve in the past few years.

Then again, few things are as good as getting people to work together than the inclination to disregard the lawman’s orders. Even in a city that lacks a sense of community the way Dhaka does, rooftops come alive every year during winter, for New Year’s Eve as well as weddings, and the capital’s sky is filled with the colours of

the noise and lights of fireworks set off by humans who want a grand celebration. Given that we have already taken so much natural environment away from animals, with our urban ecosystems that we call home, isn’t it unnecessarily cruel to inflict more torture on these species which have painstakingly adapted to us?

One has to wonder why people refuse to obey restrictions on fireworks and

the noise and lights of fireworks set off by humans who want a grand celebration.



VISUAL: STAR

Humans, at least, can complain, wait for the carnage to stop, or prepare in advance by getting earplugs and drawing up thick curtains. But what about animals, for whom a night of fireworks is nothing remotely joyful? Those with pets know what a terrorising night they have to suffer through when the sky above them erupts with fireworks.

fireworks, the air congested with the noise of explosions.

But these “rebels” fail to think of the old and the frail, the infants, the street and pet animals, or the birds. If they did, they would know that the rooftops from which they love setting off fireworks are held up by buildings housing people, including not just the young and the spritely, but infants, the elderly, and others for whom a night’s sleep is not up for sacrifice. Lighting sky lanterns in the electricity-powered tinderbox that is Dhaka is an extremely bad idea, as has been proven by the fires that have gone off in recent years during New Year’s Eve celebrations. For instance, last year, within two days of the Dhaka MRT Line-6’s inauguration, a stray lantern landed on the tracks and delayed service the next day. What if the lantern had landed on an active power line instead? Or crashed into a tree full of dry, fire-prone winter leaves?

Humans, at least, can complain, wait

into frenzies of anxiety and panic at the unrelenting barrage of noise. For animals, loud noises and flashing lights are usually signs of natural calamities, which is why they respond to these noises by trying to hide and protect themselves. But when the sounds don’t stop, they become confused and feel terrorised.

Birds suffer from disorientation, often mistaking the light from the fireworks as daylight and flying out into the open sky, only to be greeted with terror and confusion. The anxiety that sustained noise from fireworks creates may drive birds away from their natural habitats permanently. Or, in a deadly outcome, make them fly straight at building walls or into dangerous airspace.

All across the world, it has been reported that zoo animals respond very badly to fireworks. The animals at Bangladesh National Zoo, located near dense residential quarters in Dhaka’s Mirpur, may be particularly affected by

sky lanterns. Let’s consider the point of view of a Dhaka resident who has very few things to do in this city other than work, eat and sleep. On a New Year’s Eve, another item is added to the list of things that this Dhakaite is not allowed to do. Given their increasingly narrowing space for individuality, this person may think, “To hell with that,” and make use of one of the last open spaces left to them: the rooftop on their building. The rebellious zeal in this case may be a strong force, but it is neither rational nor justified.

Instead of imposing tough-sounding bans and threats of action against anyone who doesn’t comply, a heartfelt word appealing to the humane side of people may work better to keep them from setting off noisy fire hazards. In any case, if the authorities are banning fireworks and sky lanterns, it’s crucial to ensure that the ban is effective in order to protect people, animals, and our own environment.

CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

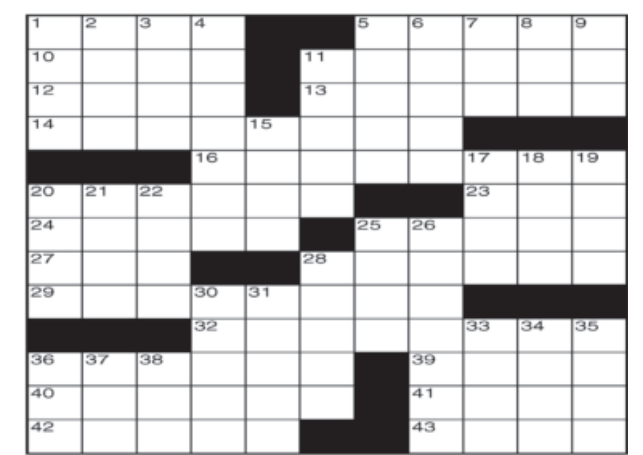
ACROSS

- 1 Clothes lines
- 5 Took a part
- 10 Fix copy
- 11 State without proof
- 12 Visitor to Siam
- 13 Put aboard, as cargo
- 14 Features of some 1950s autos
- 16 Cartel bosses
- 20 Strict
- 23 Drake’s music
- 24 States
- 25 Push rudely
- 27 Remain unused
- 28 Inclined
- 29 Spirits for fizzes
- 32 Refuse

DOWN

- 1 Warm up
- 2 Writer Ferber
- 3 Short skirt
- 4 Over-zealous fan
- 5 Next to
- 6 Brooch part
- 7 Lasso of TV
- 8 Swelled head
- 9 Bear’s lair
- 11 Flared dress
- 15 Evergreen trees

- 17 Magnetic metal
- 18 Church area
- 19 Went fast
- 20 Lip
- 21 Wicked
- 22 White
- House power
- 25 Dispatched
- 26 Former star
- 28 Shopping aids
- 30 Draw out
- 31 Like
- hurricane
- weather
- 33 Without basis
- 34 Khartoum’s river
- 35 Place at the table
- 36 Went ahead
- 37 Early hour
- 38 Cornfield cry



DECEMBER 25 ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.