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'State of world not reassuring'

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THE wars to ends wars have been fought twice in the 20th century and have been won by the forces claiming to love peace. But we have never really been free from wars. Maybe not on the scale of the First and Second World War, but for many countries and people the wars they have to experience, the wars of liberation and the wars to protect their freedom are no less fearsome and damaging. Thousands have died in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, in Central and South America, in East Asia and South Asia, and in Africa. For many, peace is still an elusive goal.

The League of Nations failed and the United Nations has not performed much better. The strong will dominate and the weak must submit. It is still a world of might is right.

The former colonies of the Europeans may have gained independence in the legal sense. But many are not truly independent. Politically and economically they remain no better than colonies. For a time, their borders were respected. But then came new ideas about a globalised world, a world without borders.

How can a country be independent if its borders are not sacred, if anyone can cross its borders freely and do anything he likes within the country?

Of course, globalisation is about free trade, open borders and free access. Countries should not protect their own banks and companies through discriminatory laws. Foreign companies should be accorded national status, i.e., there should be no difference in the treatment of local businesses and foreign-owned businesses. This, it is claimed, will benefit the developing countries and the consumers. They would have access to the best services and products at the lowest price.

But if the big foreign corporations operate freely in a country, would they not kill all the local companies? Would they not become so powerful that they would wield a disproportionately strong influence on local society and local politics? Would they not dominate the governments, as was the case with the so-called banana republics?

Historically, the East India companies set up by the European countries in order to trade with Asia ended up colonising the countries with which they traded. Thus, India, Burma and Malaysia were made colonies of the British Empire while the Malay Archipelago became the Dutch East Indies.

History has a way of repeating itself. The giant corporations and banks which belong to the rich western countries can behave like the East India companies of the past.

From merely demanding unfettered trade, they can go on to dominate and control the governments of the countries which had been opened to them. The end result will not be much different from the colonisation which had followed trading by the European trading companies of the past.

Then the struggle for independence can begin all over again and there could be violence and even a new series of wars of liberation.

Perhaps this is too pessimistic a picture of the future. But nothing that is happening today or in the aftermath of the two world wars is reassuring.

While Europe has experienced a period of peace unprecedented in its history; while Europe has consolidated into the European Union; while North America has continued to prosper, and to unite into one solid block, the developing countries continue to be developing.

In East Asia, a few have managed to progress but, suddenly, attacks on their currencies have pushed back their economies by almost two decades.

Practically all the developing countries are indebted to the rich, either directly or through their agencies. They have to place themselves under the direction of the powerful countries.

Although they try to conform to the norms determined by the rich, they find themselves quite unable to repay their debts. This means that their economies must be subjected to the directions of their creditor countries. In effect, they have become debt slaves, having lost their right to take charge of the administration and management of their economies.

The unfortunate thing is that the advice they are getting from the creditor countries and their agencies would keep them poor, unable to recover and unable to pay back their debts. It may not be intentional but few countries which had accepted the advice have been able to recover.

It must be remembered that the developed countries were once as poor and as backward as the developing countries of today. They had become developed by not doing what they are advising the developing countries to do now, i.e., by not being liberal, not opening up their borders, by protecting their young industries and by rigid regulations and laws devised by their governments.

The assertion that from the very beginning they had practised free trade and open competition is not borne out by the facts of history. We know that their East India companies thrived and prospered through monopolies, through divisions in their spheres of trading activities, through militarily defended trading stations and eventually through colonising the countries with which they were trading.

As for democracy, human rights, labour rights, justice and fairplay, their colonies and trading partners experienced nothing of these. There was no way the colonies or the trading partners could get fair trading, i.e., fair and competitive prices for their products.

The British had a policy called Imperial Preference through which they and their products gained privileged access to land for estates, and markets for their goods within the British Empire.

The Dutch had a system of forcing farmers to produce and sell their agricultural products to Dutch monopolies. Other countries used slaves or indentured labour to work on their estates.

Had there been a free Press, freedom of speech, democratic elections and human rights, it is most unlikely that the exploitation of the wealth of the colonial countries and trading partners could have gone on for a sufficient length of time for the colonial powers to prosper.

The point that has to be made is that it is not democracy, free trade and good governance that made the developed countries what they are today. Yet we are being told that the way to develop developing countries is to embrace globalisation and a borderless world, to deregulate, to do away with protectionism, to be democratic and to be liberal.

From what we have seen and experienced, the mere floating of our currencies can already lead to financial and economic disaster. Many countries are practically without effective government because of the democratic processes. How do our puny banks and corporations compete against the supergiants which have been formed in order to take advantage of a borderless world?

Today, in addition to the economic woes resulting from attempts to standardise practices in a globalised world, we are all also assailed by fears of terrorist attacks.

Terrorism has always been with us. In the two world wars, millions of non-combatants died and millions more were maimed for life. One cannot say they were not terrified by the wars. Since then, many people in many

places have suffered from terror attacks.

But they are not of the rich and the strong. They are quite ordinary citizens of rather inconsequential countries. Some 200,000 Bosnians died in Serbian ethnic cleansing. Palestinians and Israelis died also. So do the Chechens, the Kashmiris, the Rwandans, the Watusis, the Chileans and the Argentines. But the world was not moved to wage war on terrorists because these unimportant people had been terrorised.

Then, on Sept 11, 2001, the World Trade Center in New York, the business capital of the richest and most powerful nation of the world, was attacked. And everyone realised that no one is safe. The world united to fight against global terrorism.

Unfortunately, the world has never handled global terrorism of this kind. We think in terms of conventional warfare. We think if we can defeat them militarily they would surrender and sue for peace.

And so billions and billions are spent on upgrading defence and security. The only result is to harass ourselves and make us all live in constant fear of being the next victim of terror attacks.

We fear flying, we fear travelling, we fear certain countries, we fear certain religions, we fear certain people, we fear the shoes they wear, we fear cargo ships, imported goods, letters and parcels - in fact we fear everything around us.

And because of these fears we no longer invest, in our own countries or in foreign countries. And the economy of the world, the economy of every country regresses and fails.

Actually, the perpetrators of the Sept 11 attacks and the al-Qaeda couldn't have possibly expected such a result from their attacks. They have really shaken the whole world and it looks like we are going to feel this fear and the consequences for a very long time.

The success of the Sept 11 attacks is due much more to our wrong handling of the situation than the extent of the actual damage done. The billions being lost by the whole world today through economic recession, the billions being spent on security and defence can build hundreds of World Trade Center towers.

The Israelis should know by now that defence and security measures and even out-terrorising the terrorists have not stopped the suicide bombers. The world is far less thorough in defence and security than the Israelis. It stands to reason that the world fight against terror through upgrading defence and security is going to be far less successful than the Israelis.

We may not want to admit it but the terrorists are not terrorising for the fun of it. They have a reason. We may think that their reason does not warrant the kind of actions they are taking. But that kind of thinking on our part is not going to get us anywhere.

We have to look into what motivates them. If we care to look and acknowledge the causes leading to their acts of terror and we try to remove them, then we may be able to at least reduce such acts.

There are many causes, and because we will not be able to attend to all of them we cannot stop terrorism completely. But I would like to insist that the principal reason is territorial and not religious.

The Palestinians have had their land taken away from them and they have been expelled from their land and made refugees. Every time they try to regain their land, they lose more. Their struggle has been ignored by the world.

Even the killings of their people, children and non-combatants included, raised hardly an eyebrow. Unable to wage conventional war they resorted to acts of terror.

Although friendly Muslim countries are unable to help the Palestinians, the people of these countries do not feel that they should be bound by the

policies of their governments. And so we find Muslims from other countries taking part in these acts of terror.

From among the more than one billion Muslims there must be several thousands who would be willing to lose their lives in what they believe is a struggle for justice. We have to acknowledge this fact if we are to succeed in stopping global terrorism.

But, unfortunately, the world is merely aggravating the situation. Not only are we not trying to remove the causes, we are actually creating new ones. There was a time when Muslim countries were in agreement over the need to stop Iraqi aggressiveness. Today, that unity of purpose has disappeared. Muslims see the stance taken against Iraq as another act of discrimination against Muslims.

If Iraq is attacked, not only will it be a distraction in the fight against world terrorism but it is likely to increase the number of recruits to the ranks of the terrorists.

Iraq, Iran and North Korea have been labelled as the Axis of Evil. Despite the fact that North Korea has admitted that it has nuclear capability, it is not being threatened with war as Iraq is.

We do not want to see North Korea being threatened with war and the country being militarily attacked, but the accommodating attitude towards North Korea is going to anger the Muslims more.

Yet when North Korea agreed to co-operate and end its nuclear programme, it was not appreciated. There was no relaxation of the condemnation of North Korea nor was food and other aid given. Justified or not, North Korea feels it has been let down. Hence, the more unco-operative and belligerent attitude that it has adopted recently.

North Korea has never been an easy country to deal with. But whether it joins the world community or not, it is still a part of our global village. We have to learn how to befriend it and get its co-operation. Cutting off supplies of food and other necessities will not bring it to its knees. Perhaps we can nuclearbomb it out of existence. But that would be a confession of our failure.

Looking at Iraq, North Korea, Palestine and many other hot spots, I cannot help feeling that despite all our technological progress, our claim to have established a modern, more humane and sophisticated civilisations; I cannot help feeling that we have failed to learn how to cope, how to manage the world.

We still think in terms of the capacity to kill as the determinant of our strength. We still think that might is right, that the strong must dominate and the weak must submit.

Frankly, I do not think we have progressed much from the Stone Age. They used clubs and we use nuclear weapons, but the premise is still the same.

It is time to pause and rethink. Labelling people as "Satan" or "Axis of Evil" merely provokes but does not resolve anything. Oppressing people or destroying their countries will not solve problems either.

We have to get away from our old culture and values and reinvent our civilisation. The globalised world needs a change in our perception of things and in our way of dealing with the problems that must arise with change.

We cannot live in isolation any more. Globalisation is not about trade and investments only. Globalisation must affect everything that we do.

We must also accept that nothing happens in one part of the world without affecting the rest. The attack on the World Trade Center is not an attack on the US alone. It is an attack on the whole world.

By the same token, the dispossession of Palestinian land is not an exclusive problem of the Palestinians. The terrorism that assails the world today has a direct connection with the fate of the Palestinians.

Terror has become as globalised as trade and investments.

The law and policy makers of the world cannot limit their interest to their countries alone. They have to be interested in the whole world. That is why it is useful for them to come together and discuss their national problem as international issues, as problems that affect the whole world.