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New year with drumbeats of war getting louder

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IT is still the holiday season. It is supposed to be a time for celebrations. But as the world ushers in the new year, the drumbeat of war is sounding even louder.

With the groundwork for war being laid and the imminent US-led attack on Iraq has put a damper on the celebrations.

The world economic outlook is mixed, the US economy is set to struggle with no bright spot in Europe or in Japan.

Unemployment is on the rise in the developed countries, oil prices are soaring, world stock markets have caused many to lose their life savings -

the FTSE 100 and Nasdaq were down 27 per cent each and the S&P lost 25 per cent of its value last year - and major corporate scandals are still unfolding which have taught people that they "can expect nothing from institutions that are supposed to safeguard their interests".

Latin America appears to be heading towards another difficult period, poverty is still on the rise with millions living on less than US\$1 a day with more being added to their number.

Capital, knowledge and technology have resulted in wider gaps between the rich and poor, the haves and have nots, the technologically rich north and the technologically poor south.

The globalised world that emerged from the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall has proved to be unstable.

According to John Gray, Professor at the London School of Economics: "Despite all the changes in society and technology, we are returning to a world that in many ways resembles that of the late 19th century."

British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Christmas message certainly did not help to uplift spirits nor did it add to the Christmas cheer.

He told the troops to have a "Safe Christmas but prepare for war".

On the other side of the Atlantic, in the US, some 50,000 American troops will pack their bags and head for the Gulf in the coming weeks.

According to reports in London's Sunday Times "There is also talk in Washington of the most lethal opening onslaught in the history of war, including 1,000 sorties from bombers".

Even as the UN weapon inspectors continue with their task assigned to them, the US is preparing for war.

The question now is not if, but when? And Britain's Development Secretary, Clare Short, says "it's less than 50 per cent likely that we will do the right thing".

The end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003 has seen heightened tension around the globe which is not helped by the repeated travel advisories.

The focus on terrorism and terrorists is splitting the world. Even as

the US and its chief ally in the war, Britain, say it is not "anti-Muslim or anti-Islam" but that assurance is increasingly sounding hollow.

And as Short points out "you can see it (clash of civilisations) coming true before our eyes".

The majority are against war. But tune in to British television and American media one cannot be faulted for believing that the whole world is for war and want the "evil" Saddam Hussein who is "a major security threat to the world" removed, his weapons of mass destruction including nuclear, chemical and biological seized and his manufacturing facilities destroyed.

Will that make the world a safer place as Washington wants us to believe?

The answer is no. Gray says "This new type of conflict will not be quenched by a 'regime change' in Iraq."

He warns "If the US and its allies overthrow Saddam, they will destabilise the whole of the Middle East. By inflaming hostility in the region already riven with intractable religious and ethnic conflicts they are bound to increase terrorism" - something that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has repeatedly warned.

Then again Gray says the "Already weak, global markets will be thrown into turmoil on a scale not seen for decades. With the hope of progress forgotten..."

The world economy and millions around the globe will be in for an even more difficult period.

The drumbeat of war is beating louder. But there are the silent majority who are against the war, however, their voices are not heard nor do they get as much air time or column inches as those in favour of war.

To illustrate her point Short in an interview with Sunday Times says, "If I ring relatives around the world everyone is worried. I think the danger is that people think they cannot do anything about it ...If you listen to the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, European Powers, African governments, Asian governments, they don't want it (the war)".

Their voices are drowned by proponents of war and those wanting a "regime change" in Baghdad.

There could be other approaches and solutions to the problem rather than going to war with its resultant havoc, suffering of the innocent and massive destruction.

Short says "There has to be a just cause; there has to be no other way.

I think we must stick to the UN ...(But) destruction has become democratic".

The hawks in Washington believe that the war can be won in "two days". Others say it will be a long drawn-out war which will cause immense damage to property and human life as well as render millions homeless and give

rise to a flood of refugees.

Will Hans Blix and his weapon inspectors be allowed to do their job?  
The Swedish diplomat's determination to remain independent of Washington has made him many enemies in American political circles.

Even as the inspectors continue with their job the US has already passed judgment.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld says weapons inspectors have no chance of tracking down Iraq's nuclear chemical and biological weapons. "Inspectors have never been successful in terms of a discovery process," he is reported as saying.

The world has enough problems to deal with right now without having to add more. But will the most powerful man in the world listen to the majority and the less powerful?

Perhaps not, as democracy, increasingly, is interpreted as the voice, wish and will of the powerful. The poor majority do not figure in the democratic unipolar world as more of the world's decisions are made in Washington just as many of its problems are being Made in America.