**Dreadful December**

BY A B BA S N A S I R 2020-12-27

DECEMBER normally brings cheer as millions of people around the globe try and forget their worries and rigours of daily life to find respite in the festive season. But there will be years when December is different. For so many of us it was 1971; and then for the region the 2004 tsunami, the real one (not the one `generated` by tectonic plateshifting in Rawalpindi a decade and some later), and of course the APS Peshawar massacre in 2014.

I am just making a passing reference to tragic Decembers but realise fully well that this list would not be exhaustive by any means. You can draw up your own equally challenging Decembers` list. Benazir Bhutto`s tragic murder in 2007 ought to feature in any list.

This winter it is the second wave of the pandemic that is wreaking havoc around the globe. With the rollout of the Covid-19 vaccine in some affluent developed countries for starters, the finish line finally appears in sight. But not for everyone.

The tragedy is the many more lives the pandemic will cut short, short of the finish line, as vaccinating the global population is an undertaking of unprecedented proportions. From its very availability to resources and infrastructure to deliver the vaccine to masses of humanity, there are issues that aren`t easy to address.

The continuing loss of life exacted by the pandemic will temper the festivities and lead to some quiet reflection as its scale has left nobody unaffected. Even if one is not personally hit I am sure there is hardly a person not familiar with friends and acquaintances who have lost loved ones this year. The tragedy will be deeper and graver over the coming months as affluent nations and individuals jump to the front of the vaccination queue and the rest are forced to wait their turn, even as their circumstances suggest they can least afford such a grave illness or loss of life.

Lockdowns, health advisories and travel restrictions have left family, including my siblings, and friends stranded at different ends of the world amid a question somewhere in the back of the mind if we are ever destined to be together again.That is life. And as long as there is life, I suppose, there is hope. I say this even as I acknowledge that this December has been particularly unkind.

Losing a friend always leaves you bereft. And seeing a f riend shattered by the loss of a loved one is no less a torment.

On Dec 16, my friend of some 30 years, Dawn columnist Irfan Husain, finally lost his nearly fouryear battle with a rare kind of cancer that he fought as only he could with his zest for life.

We tend to glorify those who are no more. Butthere can`t be a truer description of Irfan than that he epitomised kindness, warmth, charm, reason, intellect, integrity and humanity like few do. He was one of the most well-read men I have known, a true connoisseur of art and music, and an energetic traveller. And yet his immense intellect made him humble.

He reasoned with the most unreasonable of people with such patience that an impatient fool like me would do well to emulate. He must rank among the most respected and liked among our columnists because, despite being firm in his core beliefs of secularism and pluralism, he rarely wrote in anger and was always measured.

From the large garden-level eat-in kitchen at their London home to the country houses they lived in, in Devizes and then Dorset, we were always welcomed with immense warmth by Irfan and his equally wonderful, generous wife Charlotte. And treated to Michelin-star standard cooking. We were fellow foodies. The last I was in London I drove down to see him in Dorset. He had had the chemo the day before and was quite poorly. Butwhat was his main concern? That he`d been unable to cook for me that day.

This festive season our thoughts are with Charlotte, Irfan`s son Shakir, grandsons Danial and Suleman. All three brought him such endless joy and he was such a proud dad and granddad.

I first met Mazhar Abbas in Hyderabad at my uncle`s place during a visit. We were both in school then. Many years later, we found ourselves in Karachi University where he was a journalism student and a committed progressive activist who risked life, limb and liberty for the cause he believedin.

And I followed him into journalism too. We worked together on the same floor in Haroon House in the 1980s where I was in the Dawn newsroom and Mazhar in The Star, next door. He was an ace reporter who had the uncanny ability to be on the spot where news was breaking. He was an equally committed trade unionist. In between his commitment to journalism and striving for the rights of journalists and media workers there was hardly anytime left to do anything else. So many of us moved on from our political activism days. But Mazhar remained steadfast.

We used to wonder if he would ever find a partner who would see him as a co-traveller. Then he met and married Erum or Dolly as friends and f amily called her. A quiet, shy woman of immense inner strength with a disarming smile. They stood by each other through thick and thin. She and Mazhar carved a wonderful life together, supported each other and had two wonderful daughters Sheetal and Kissa. Earlier this week, Erum passed away after being hospitalised briefly in Karachi.

Knowing how central she was to their lives I can`t imagine what the three of them are going through. Thoughts, prayers also with all those who lost loved ones in 2020. Hope and pray the New Year brings some solace, good health, even joy.  The writer is a former editor o f D aw n.

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