**A blurred world**

BY H U M A Y U S U F 2021-05-03

THESE are bleak times. There is the pandemic, and then there is more. In a powerful piece for the Guardian last week, Arundhati Roy described the Indian state`s handling of the coronavirus pandemic as a crime against humanity. Human Rights Watch, also last week, issued a major report accusing Israel of apartheid crimes in its treatment of Palestinians. Less than a fortnight ago, British MPs voted to declare that China is committing genocide against Uighurs.  
  
Crimes against humanity. Apartheid.  
  
Genocide. These are the gravest charges.  
  
Each on its own merit should evoke global horror, moral outrage and swift action.  
  
What we can expect instead is a blur of news headlines, a smattering of limp resolutions, and slow progress in disparate litigation.  
  
In the 21st century when the global population is richer, healthier and safer than ever before, the pandemic notwithstanding -eachcommunity suffering shockinginjustice and violence deserves a befitting global response. Why is this not the case? On World Press Freedom Day, we can start with some introspection. The 24/7 news cycle, and the commercial imperatives of the media industry which strives for clicks rather than to inform the public, bears much blame. All issues are equally dramatised, everything is breaking news. The din is so loud, that when we need to listen we no longer know how to pay attention.  
  
The lack of credibility of news institutions either because they have failed in their mission to inform and empower the public, or because they have been discredited by populist politicians also means that the typical reaction to provocative news is a knee-jerk scepticism, or outright mistrust.  
  
The shift from a unipolar world to a multipolar one is also part of the problem.  
  
Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US served as global policeman, and Western countries typically took a unified stance, particularly on issues with a moral dimension. In another era, charges such as genocide or apartheid by credible rights groups would be followed by a strong response from the West, led by the US, and comprising a range of formal and informal sanctions, including aid restrictions, reduced security support, and economic and diplomatic isolation. Action would also be swift, favouring a multilateral, collaborative approach. This is no longer possible, particularly as organisations such as the UN are increasingly hollowed out and impotent.  
  
Donald Trump`s term in office, following the increasingly apparent moral ambiguity of the US evidentin its engagementin drone warfare and maintenance of Guantanamo, have made this scenario less threatening.The US is retreating from the world stage, and where it seeks to slap wrists, China and Russia step up to hold hands. In a multipolar world, there will always be space for moral relativism motivated by politicking, leading to tepid action against objectively horrifying situations.  
  
Populist politics, with its us-versus-them rhetoric, and elevation of all transgressions to dramatic proportions in the hopes of sowing further division and consolidating bases, also fuels apathy in the face of injustice. For example, many Indians will not engage with Roy`s argument, and will instead dismiss her as a liberal, a socialist, a traitor.  
  
The gravity of her charges against the Indian state will also be undermined by the fact that the phrase `crime against humanity` was deployed last year against the Tableeghi Jamaatin India afterit organised a conference with attendees from across the Muslim world. That gathering led to the group being labelled `corona jihadis` and accused of crimes against humanity forspreading the virus by a BJPdominated media industry. In this context, Roy`s words can be reframed as petty and vengeful.  
  
Language has become cheap, politicised, weaponised and, as aresult, ineffectual when it needs to wield influence, change minds and spur action.  
  
Other factors fuel inaction too. Last year, an International Institute for Strategic Studies report indicated that 60 per cent of armed conflicts have been active for at least a decade, and global peace-making prospects are in decline. Wars are undeclared and involve numerous actors seeking power, profit and proxies. Such nebulous situations defy activism or political and legal action because the target of ire remains unclear.  
  
Ultimately, the world is lacking empathy and suf fering from poor communal recollection. As communities move away from their own direct experiences of injustice and violence, they seem to care little for the plight of others. In 2014, South African Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu was describing the situation in Israel as apartheid; it will take those of us who haven`t experienced a similar system a while to catch up. Perhaps the one silver lining of this pandemic will be a global restoration of basic moral judgement?  The writer is a political and integrity risk analyst.  
  
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