**Challenges to survival**

Lawrence Wittner

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For some time, it’s been apparent that the world’s nations are not meeting the growing challenges to human survival. A key challenge comes from modern war.

Over the centuries, as military weapons have grown ever more destructive, war-related devastation has grown accordingly. World War II was the deadliest military conflict in human history, with an estimated 70-85 million people perishing from the war directly or through war-caused disease, famine, and other indirect factors.

Most of the dead were civilians. In addition, many millions of people were wounded – blinded, crippled, driven mad, or otherwise ravaged by the vast carnage. Large portions of the globe had become a charnel house, with the battered survivors left to desperately scavenge for food amid the burnt-out rubble and ruin.

Although some scholars have pointed out that warfare has declined since then, and especially since the end of the Cold War, there was a sharp turnabout in 2022, when the wars in Ethiopia and Ukraine contributed to more battle-related deaths than in any year since 1994. By late 2023, Russia’s military invasion of Ukraine alone had produced an estimated 315,000 killed or injured Russian troops, while the number of casualties among Ukrainian troops and civilians, though unknown, is certainly enormous.

Among these and the many other wars currently raging – in Sudan, Myanmar, Ethiopia, the Sahel, and Syria, to name only a few – the recent one in Gaza, with the fastest daily death rate of the 21st century, is particularly alarming, having already led to nearly 30,000 deaths and nearly 70,000 injuries.

And then, of course, there’s nuclear war, which emerged in 1945 with the utter annihilation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and which now has the capacity to end virtually all life on earth. Amid public threats from leaders of nuclear-armed nations to launch a nuclear war, the editors of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists have set their ‘Doomsday Clock’ at its closest ever to apocalypse.

War – particularly nuclear war – is probably the fastest way to extinguish the human race, but there are other crises underway that, on a longer-range basis, seem likely to accomplish the same task.

The most serious of these crises is environmental. In recent decades, there has been a rapid loss of biodiversity, with the sixth mass extinction of wildlife clearly accelerating.

Pollution has grown dramatically. This includes pollution of land and water caused by chemicals and by plastic (which takes 400 years to decompose) and of the air caused by industrial, motor vehicle, and other emissions (leading to an estimated 4.2 to 7 million human deaths annually).

Damage to the soil, caused especially by use of toxic chemicals and other pollutants, as well as by deforestation, has become particularly severe. The United Nations has estimated that some 40 percent of the planet’s soil is now degraded.

A key element in the environmental collapse is the growing climate catastrophe, caused primarily by the burning of fossil fuels. Melting icecaps and rising sea levels, unprecedented hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, and ocean acidification are all well underway.

Together with unsustainable farming practices, rising temperatures have produced growing food and water scarcity. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres declared that, unless immediate action is taken, there will be a “global food emergency that could have long term impacts on hundreds of millions of adults and children.”

Furthermore, it is estimated that, by 2025, two-thirds of the world’s people might face water shortages. Commenting on the deteriorating climate situation, Guterres declared gloomily in September 2023 that “humanity has opened the gates to hell.”

The rise of rightwing nationalism provides yet another challenge to human survival. In recent years, rightwing political movements – headed by authoritarian demagogues such as Donald Trump (United States), Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), Vladimir Putin (Russia), Narendra Modi (India), Recep Tayyip Erdogan (Turkey), Marine Le Pen (France), Benjamin Netanyahu (Israel), Viktor Orban (Hungary), and their counterparts in other lands – have transformed the landscape of world politics.

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