
THE ATMOSPHERIC HOLOCAUST

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Human inhumanity to Other Humans

The last century has witnessed tragedies caused by the cruelty of humans to humans. Apart from World Wars I and II, the world has witnessed spates of killings and mayhem. Most of the tragedies began many years ago in the Middle East. The clash between Israel and Palestine preceded and stood in the forefront of a violent struggle between the rich nations of the West and the suffering people of the Middle East. Minor wars and civil wars manifested themselves even outside the Middle East.

Belsan exemplifies the horrors of terrorism

One of the most horrific aspects of terrorism was manifested in the Republic of Russia. The incident I refer to is the deadly massacre of hundreds and hundreds of innocent school children in a school situated in the small township of Belsan, by the Chechnyan rebels about one year ago. The magnitude of this disaster, due not to the ravages of nature but to the cruelty of man himself, is one of the exceptions in this article. We in Sri Lanka learned about this horrifying murder of innocents only one year later when some helpless court proceedings have commenced against a few of the assailants. The lack of information and space does not permit me at this stage to go into the massacre of the Belsan children. However, the truth of, what I now do not hesitate to call, 'terrorism', will soon be manifest to the world where modern communication systems cannot keep such deadly events hidden.

The tragedy of Africa

Countries in the African continent have recently been fighting and destroying one another – all this in the context of poverty, destitution, disease and other forms of human suffering. Countries such as Sudan, the Congo, Rwanda and Algeria remain centres of war and destruction. Though conferences are held regarding the unheard of poverty of Africa, these conferences have thus far been limited to words. Action is still far away.

Nature's role in the destruction of the Earth

The purpose of our present article, however, is not to describe the global disasters caused by man against man. Whilst Homo Sapiens divided itself into the rich and the poor, with the former struggling to exploit for itself the riches of our planet, Nature, within the last year or more, has decided to play a role in the destructive tendencies of those who people the planet Earth. Natural disasters have swept through parts of our world. It is significant to note here that the greatest disasters have manifested themselves in the Earth's Northern Hemisphere where lie the largest land-masses and contain the greatest riches of the world. It is also worthwhile noting that within the last year or so, natural disasters have struck mainly the rich countries of this hemisphere. Another significant fact is that natural disasters, which occurred in the prosperous countries of the Far East like Japan and now China, have spread in a highly significant way to the more prosperous countries of the West. In the Far East, apart from atmospheric disturbances like tornados and typhoons, earthquakes became unusually common in Japan, which historically is situated on a dangerous earthquake belt. China itself experienced some earthquakes and several mine disasters leading to the deaths of thousands of its workers. Taiwan is currently in the grip of a devastating typhoon heading towards Mainland China.

Nature turns its deadly attention to the European continent

In the northern part of Europe, Paris and parts of Germany have experienced floodwaters of a magnitude unknown before. Other countries, such as Bulgaria, have also experienced floodwaters of a disastrous nature.

While the northern regions of Europe have been experiencing torrential rains and floods, other parts of Europe have been subject to an opposite fate. Drought has ravaged countries of the Iberian Peninsula like Portugal and Spain. Wildfires have been raging through the forests, and some habitations nearby, which even human efforts have found difficult to

control. From the Far East to the coastal regions of the Atlantic, man is experiencing the fury of nature as never before.

Nature spares not the rich and the mighty

The latest ravages of nature are now creating havoc and mayhem in the United States of America. One of the deadliest hurricanes in history attacked a nation that sought to dominate the earth and inflict its might and power upon other countries of the world, principally Iraq, Iran and in the Far East, even the poor nation of North Korea.

Hurricanes do occur in the American continents and its outlying islands. But late in August, hurricane Katrina ripped through several states of the USA causing death and destruction wherever it laid its impress. The worst-affected state was Mississippi, where fierce winds brought down sturdy buildings and the accompanying rainfall created floods that devastated the state. The worst-affected city without a doubt was New Orleans. This was till now, one of the showpieces of America. Beautiful in construction, with broad palm-lined highways and pleasure centres, which the rest of the US could never equal. New Orleans was, in fact, the pride of the United States of America. However, New Orleans lay below sea level and was protected from the waters outside by artificial barriers, and particularly by forms of instrumentation referred to as 'Levies.'

Katrina, however, destroyed almost completely the beauty of New Orleans, and its pleasure centres became a thing of the past. The city was virtually flattened. Almost miraculously, over a million people were successfully evacuated from New Orleans just before Katrina wrought its devastation. Television pictures have shown 20 to 25 motor vehicles heaped together and lying one on top of the other. 80% of the city was inundated by floodwaters that burst through the manmade barriers. People who remained behind climbed rooftops, but even this did not save many of those who were reluctant or unable to leave their homes. About 20,000 people, helpless and unable to leave this city, crowded into what was known as the Super-Dome. However, the fierce winds of Katrina broke down even parts of the roof of the Dome.

Thousands of evacuees were moved to the Astro Dome in Houston. However, thousands more were still left behind in New Orleans. Steeped in desperation, most of these people who could find no transport, waded through the floodwaters on foot. In many instances the waters reached up to their

waist. In Louisiana about 9 oil refineries were shut down. In the Gulf of Mexico 2 oil rigs broke away from their moorings. Therefore, oil prices in the rest of the USA skyrocketed, impacting oil prices in the rest of the world as well. Having devastated New Orleans and Louisiana along with the many islands off the coastline, Katrina moved eastwards, skirting and partially destroying Alabama and Atlanta and further away Kentucky and Pennsylvania, while skirting the edges of New York itself before it finally died away.

American people, like most of the rest of the human world, demonstrated the goodness, the generosity and the genuine feeling of most human beings. However, to a very large extent, particularly in New Orleans, the situation was at first very desperate. There are still many unanswered questions as to why it took so many days for rescue forces to reach the poor thousands stranded in a city virtually converted into a lake. Meanwhile, the USA has had the military might and wealth to dominate the rest of the world by force, murder and mayhem.

To describe adequately the present American tragedy, many books may have to be written in the years to come. However, with personal disabilities of my own, this task I am sure will be undertaken by historians in the near future.

How nature has protected Sri Lanka

Living and working as I do in the small island of Sri Lanka situated below the Indian subcontinent, I would like to end this article by referring to nature's attitude to our land.

It is a significant fact that disasters like earthquakes and atmospheric disturbances such as hurricanes, tornados, typhoons and the like have spared our island home for generations and centuries past. Questions may be asked by my readers about the impact of the Tsunami that devastated parts of the southern and eastern coastlines of Sri Lanka on 26 December last year. However, it must be noted that the Tsunami which destroyed parts of the coastlines of eleven to twelve countries bordering the Indian Ocean did not originate in any of these countries. It was the consequence of a seabed quake bordering the Island of Sumatra, which spread its waves of destruction to Sri Lanka many thousands of miles away.

However, Sri Lanka did experience one cyclonic disaster somewhere in the 1950s. It is worth describing even briefly at this state, the dynamics of a cyclone. In the atmosphere

that normally would flow from east to west around the globe, many disturbances are caused due to temperature differences and other factors. Due to various reasons, which space does not permit me to describe here, these always occur in random hot and cold patches for miles above the solid earth. Air tends to rise with various degrees of violence from the heated regions of the earth and descend to cooler regions. It is thus complexity of atmospheric motions that are responsible for phenomena, which we have mentioned above such as hurricanes, tornados and even cyclones. Pressures in heated regions are low relative to pressures in the cooler regions of our atmosphere. Consequently, atmospheric air tends to rush from cooler regions to heated areas. However, atmospheric air does not normally rush directly from a cooler environment to the heated centres of the atmosphere. It tends to move in spiral fashion to the heated centre. It is such spiral motions that constitute what we know today as cyclones. Even though the atmospheric motions are spiral in nature, the accompanying wind systems associated with torrential rainfall can be of a high order of magnitude.

Two significant features of cyclones must be mentioned here even to understand the Batticaloa cyclone of the 1950s. Two cyclones in the same hemisphere of the earth tend to attract each other, while a cyclone in the northern hemisphere and another in the southern hemisphere tends to repel each other. These phenomena can be explained in turns of the rotation of the earth.

Cyclones often originate in the Bay of Bengal. Again, as a result of the earth's rotation, they tend to move from east to west. It might seem that, due to its location, Sri Lanka should be the target of many cyclones. However, cyclones on any speeding object or vehicles tend to veer rightwards in the northern hemisphere and leftwards in the southern hemisphere. These deflections are due to what physicists call the Corollas Effect. The result is that cyclones approaching Sri Lanka commonly take a rightward turn, avoiding Sri

Lanka and bashing the coastlines of South India and Bangladesh. These rightward and leftward turns are also associated with the Earth's rotation.

During the Batticaloa cyclone, however, a similar cyclone had developed westward in the Arabian Sea in the same hemisphere. The Arabian cyclone, being in the same hemisphere exerted a strong force of attraction on a cyclone moving towards Sri Lanka from the Bay of Bengal. Instead of turning as it usually would in a rightward direction and saving the island of Sri Lanka, this cyclone was naturally diverted towards our island itself. This is the cause of the cyclonic disaster, which hit the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. In the Batticaloa region particularly, massive coconut and palmyrah trees were uprooted. Dwelling houses of the poor residents of the area were flattened by the impact of the cyclonic winds. Even boats of significant magnitude in the Trincomalee harbour experienced the force of this cyclone. Many were destroyed in the process.

Apart from a few such rare disasters, our island home has been protected by nature. Referring to Sri Lanka, I would like to modify a line from Revd W.S. Senior, who was familiar with our island: "It is a land where every prospect pleases but only a few men are vile."

Time and space do not permit me to go into greater detail about the onslaughts of nature against its own creation, namely the earth. I myself cannot account for the natural tragedies that have been rampant in the last century and the beginning of the present. More competent people than myself I hope, will analyse these phenomena in the many years to come.

Note: Due to physical disabilities of my own I have been unable to write the above article by myself. I express my fervent thanks to my wife, Joyce, who patiently wrote down what I dictated from memory, and details provided by the media. ■

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