Let's take a giant leap with rocket science

Professor Tan Sri Dato' Dzulkifli Abd Razak

Comment

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IT was a day to be remembered, July 21, 1969, the day man first set foot on the moon.

At precisely 2017 GMT, on July 20, the lunar module, named The Eagle descended on the Sea of Tranquility. At 0256 GMT the next day, astronaut Neil Armstrong stepped out of the lunar module and uttered the immortal words: "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind."

Together with Edwin Aldrin, Armstrong spent some 21/2 hours on the moon carrying out experiments and collecting samples, while Michael Collins orbited above in the spaceship Columbia.

This landing on the moon marked the accomplishment of one of the most difficult challenges undertaken by man.

US President John F. Kennedy had thrown the challenge to his country's space agency in 1961, barely six weeks after the Soviet Union's Yuri Gagarin became the first man to go into space and orbit earth.

It also marked the fulfilment of Jules Verne's prediction of the launching of moonships in his great novel From the Earth to the Moon.

While it was not motivated entirely out of scientific curiosity, the Apollo 11 mission did uncover numerous findings about the origin of the solar system.

But 40 years on, many are wondering whether the acclaimed "one giant leap for mankind" is happening given the state of humankind today.

Indeed, the mesmerising lunar view of "Earthrise", "the most influential environmental photograph ever taken" by astronaut William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission that was relayed to earth in 1968 was in many ways deceiving because it did not really reflect the true picture of what the earth was going through.

"Earthrise" and the blueness of its hue somehow led us into believing that all was well on earth when in fact its bio-capacity was being slowly eroded, its atmosphere insidiously poisoned by greenhouse gases.

There was no indication or mention at all that there was in fact a gradual building up of temperature that would lead to global warming in the coming decades.

Only about 600 million people, according to the Guinness Book of Records, watched Armstrong's moon walk live, and they represented only a small portion of the total human population.

The rest were more concerned about the pressing need to earn money to put food on the table, fight off diseases and cope with the terrible effects of numerous local and other conflicts.

Today, there are billions more people on earth and for the vast majority of them, the moon is much too far away, literally and figuratively, and will remain a mere symbol of unfulfilled hopes.

Now that it is obvious that the American rush to the moon was more of a psychological war against the Soviets who were seen to be ahead in the "Space War", and the whole programme takes on a different, if cynical, complexion.

More so when spending on space programme was used to shield the tremendous increase in military spending during the Cold War days.

This is certainly not the first time that two superpowers were involved in a race.

That terrible race to be the first to build the atomic bomb during World War 2 led to the tragic events of August 1945 when the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were razed to the ground.

Viewed this way the space race was more ideological than we care to admit.

Under the pretext that it was meant to ease the pressure of overpopulation on planet earth, it turned out to be a huge disappointment for today there is no apparent easing of the pressure.

Instead, it is getting from bad to worse on all fronts, causing some to question the wisdom of investing so much to reach the moon.

All these resources -- man, money and machines -- could have gone a long way to really ease the pressure on earth where it is more urgently required for the greater majority of the people.

Thus, as we acknowledge and applaud the courageous efforts to land man on the moon repeatedly, we may need to re-adjust our priorities in how to use the remaining finite resources.

The knowledge and experiences gained in terms of innovative ideas and collaborative efforts could help save the world.

Let us put to good use the advantages of rocket science for the betterment of "mankind", to take it one giant leap forward.

It takes the same sort of commitment no doubt, perhaps with the comfort that it would incur much less risk relatively speaking, but save more lives.

To be sure, this is just as challenging as landing a man on the moon. In similar ways, as Kennedy acknowledged then, it is "not because (it is) easy, but because (it is) hard".

The challenge is now squarely ours to meet.

* The writer is the Vice-Chancellor of Universiti Sains Malaysia. He can be contacted at vc@usm.my