

Trapped by poverty, war, pestilence and disaster

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Article

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AS the year comes to a close, most are overwhelmed by a somewhat "sinking" feeling. A series of photographs published by Time (Dec 18) as "The Best Photos of 2006" with its tagline: "No ifs, ands or buts (<http://www.time.com/time/yip/2006/>)" reflects such a feeling.

After all, a picture is worth a thousand words, especially when there is no word that can accurately describe the overall state of near-anarchy that the world has descended into over the last one year; and the emotions that spill over from it.

Aptly so, Time wrote: "The biggest stories of the year, after all, were people trapped by war, poverty, disaster."

Staring in the face, undoubtedly, is the bloody quagmire in Iraq as depicted by the classic picture of an Iraqi woman in despair witnessing a burning car, the result of a remotely detonated bomb in Baghdad's central district of Karrada.

This is followed by another picture showing an Iraqi family forced to live under "house arrest" for weeks at a time because they were too scared to venture outdoors.

Underscoring this is the recently released Iraq Study Group Report, The Way Forward — A New Approach, acknowledging the situation in Iraq as grave and deteriorating without even acknowledging the cliché "war on terror" throughout the report.

In fact, among the recommendations put forward is the call for new and enhanced diplomatic and political efforts in Iraq and the region.

There is also a call for a change in the primary mission for the invading forces to responsibly leave Iraq.

Overshadowed by Iraq is Afghanistan where the situation has also deteriorated.

Only last week, Afghan president Hamid Karzai was reportedly in tears when he recounted how the country's children were killed in the latest campaign against the Taliban.

"We're not as strong as the foreigners. We can't prevent the terrorists coming from Pakistan," he lamented.

"We can't prevent the Nato coalition from bombing terrorists. And our children are dying because of that."

While thanking the West for helping out, he said that they "still they can't rescue Afghanistan and its children".

Cruelty, he said, is at the highest level. Already, the death of civilians stood at about one-quarter of the total, with more than 100 suicide attacks recorded.

Earlier, the US ambassador in Kabul told the New York Times that he expected the "next few years to be quite bloody".

In other words, the worst is not yet over as the Taliban is said to be gearing up for a spring offensive that could dwarf what has been seen before, as predicted by some sources, including the US ambassador himself.

The Time photograph of a truckload of wounded soldiers awaiting evacuation in eastern Afghanistan, after being attacked by the Taliban, only serves as a reminder how much uglier things can become in the near future.

A similar reminder comes from the photo of a soldier rescuing a colleague wounded by a sniper in Iraq. Random killing in Iraq is expected to further intensify.

As though these are not grim enough, the latest addition to this is the "landscape of despair", portraying the aftermath of the recent war in Lebanon.

The picture highlighted what is left of a Beirut neighbourhood due to repeated bombardment. The barely month-long war has claimed more than 1,000 lives, again mostly civilians.

To match this is a photograph of friends and families in Haifa grieving the loss of their loved ones.

If the attack on Lebanon saw a cease-fire, the case of Sri Lanka is "the cease-fire that wasn't" — the title of the next photo.

The Norwegian-brokered cease-fire was riddled with assassinations, suicide bombings, ambushes and clashes between government forces and "separatists".

By October, the country was back on heightened conflict with already more than 3,000 people dead in 2006.

Needless to say, many of them are civilians.

Elsewhere in Africa the situation was no better. Darfur, in the war-ravaged region of Sudan, was just one of many that made the headlines.

The fighting has resulted in hundreds of thousands fleeing to neighbouring villages, towns and countries, but only to find no safe haven.

In some cases, it created a second wave of refugees. Not only were shelters burned down, life itself was not spared as evident by the charred bodies captured by the photos with the title "The final traces".

No less disastrous were the calamities that struck last year, notably the deadly earthquake measuring 6.3 Richter magnitude in Java, near Yogyakarta, in May.

The death toll exceeded 6,000 and at least as many as 250,000 people have been displaced at what used to be a popular tourist spot 400km east of Jakarta.

Compounding this was the eruption of Mount Merapi, said to be one of the world's most active volcanoes, causing even more mass evacuations.

There was also a 7.7 magnitude undersea earthquake-spawned tsunami, about 180km off the coast of Pangandaran in June.

Elsewhere: Mount Sakurajima in Japan, Tungurahua volcano in Ecuador and Mount Mayon in the Philippines spewed volcanic gases.

In the Philippines too, a mountain overlooking Guinsahugon village disintegrated into a mudslide, burying nearly 40ha of land. Heavy rain, deadly winds and flooding are common in many places.

Meanwhile, Malaysia is still reeling from its worst floods in the south of the peninsula.

Generally, Asia, despite its new-found wealth, has had to pay dearly for its prosperity.

Ironically, a state of crisis involving the air, water, soil, forest and even the cities worsened in 2006.

Photos of children scavenging through the trash for survival, aptly titled "Bottom of the heap", are still common.

This has relevance to the latest Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, where in 2000 the richest one per cent of adults, most of whom live in Europe or the United States, owned 40 per cent of global assets.

The richest 10 per cent of adults accounted for 85 per cent of assets. By contrast, the bottom 50 per cent of the world's adult population owned less than one per cent of the world's wealth.

We have not begun to talk about the long-standing problems of AIDS and bird flu, or the escalating cost of energy, the impending nuclear crisis, and lack of credible global leadership, especially since the turn of the century.

Clearly, the challenges ahead are daunting. It looks like good wishes for a Happy New Year are likely to remain just that — good wishes! All the same, here is wishing all readers a Happy 2007.

And to Muslim readers *Selamat Hari Raya Aidil Adha*.

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