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The New 2020

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COVID-19 has already become an infamous new word in our lexicon. It has changed the world, although we do not know the short and long term effects yet. The difference on how we started the year and where we are now, three months later, are as day and night. There will certainly be a new lifestyle with regards to our family, friends, colleagues and others. The pandemic has permeated all aspects of our life. It has made us become more aware of our own health and hygiene, as well as those of others. All other considerations with the exception of our financial condition are now on the backburner.

This is also true for nations. The health situation and its economic effects now trump all other worries or problems. The media hardly reports on what happens in Syria, Yemen or other hotspots. The migrant issue does not even make it to the front pages. Nothing else matters. We already have a new dichotomy. Some call it a trade-off. The balance between health and the economy has changed the discussion between freedom and security, although they are also closely related. While making health safety a priority, the economy is suffering massively, thus making it more difficult to take the appropriate decisions. In addition to this, the security aspect needs to be handled without disturbing the freedom of citizens. The people should know that certain precautions are not permanent.

Countries, states, cities and even small communities have locked down. It is every community or nation for itself. Cooperation, collaboration and solidarity have all melted away in the face of local concerns. There is a breakdown of support within the European Union and even among the states of the USA, as borders get closed and help is refused or delayed. Most of the emerging and developing countries have been left to themselves making their situation even direr.

Whenever there was a crisis in the past, the USA and other Western countries would take the lead in finding a way out. We do not see any semblance of this now. The international community has failed colossally. The absence of global leadership in the face of a worldwide common enemy has been incomprehensible. All the international, regional organizations or groups, G-7, G-20 or BRICS have failed to rise up to the challenge and uphold cooperation. Although the G-20 was able to have a virtual emergency meeting on this issue we still are waiting for concrete measures.

The reasons for this lack of cooperation will be discussed for years to come, but we can already see some of them. Guidance has been lacking because many governments have either initially belittled or outright denied that there was a problem. Even when the World Health Organization declared that we are facing a pandemic, denial continued in some of the highest levels of governance. Many thought that they could prevail over this calamity due to their geography or they refused to believe expert advice. Ignorance is not bliss, it is dangerous.

Each country has also responded differently to the crisis. The disturbing fact is that all this has happened in the face of early warnings by experts or events witnessed in China. Even when cases and deaths piled up, there was a reluctance to believe the severity and contagiousness of the virus; the result is ostrich politics.

We have also seen a lack of transparency, a fallout of the different regimes in power. Hiding the true situation because they cannot trust the people is just an excuse. Rather than fearing the reaction of the public, governments should give their citizens all the facts, trusting and encouraging them to act accordingly, thus building up confidence for the authorities. Disturbing control measures are being taken by some countries as the crisis is used as a justification.

However, there is also a bright side as seen in all crisis situations. Every crisis produces true leaders who are honest and not afraid to tell the truth. This could be a harbinger of eventual change. The lack of honesty will eventually strike back like a boomerang and may have long term repercussions for governments. We have seen in the recent past how experts had been side-lined in favour of superficial social media statements. If there is more convergence in preventive policies today, it is because of the hard truth the pandemic has wrought. Science seems to be making a comeback. Although it is still an uphill effort.

Another silver lining is with respect to climate change. As planes are grounded and lock downs spread worldwide thus restricting travel; industries closing down along with people consuming differently, the environment can breathe a little. We should not lose sight of the importance of this respite and continue to build up on this urgent matter. Fighting the negative effects of climate change should continue to be a top priority.

We still do not fully know everything about COVID-19 and we have even sometimes witnessed contradicting suggestions on its management. We can only guess when this pandemic will be brought under control. Even then, its control will no doubt be unequal, changing from country to country and even between cities. This unevenness may further complicate the economic situation, as those that have somehow managed to control the virus will hesitate to open up to the outside. Just look at China's response. Therefore the financial suffering of the millions may continue.

Although we heard several explanations on the origin of COVID-19, the international community remains to be completely convinced. China, as the home for starting two contagious diseases in less than two decades also needs to give an honest accounting of how the outbreak came to be. In the least, it has to change its habits or bring in more stringent hygiene measures. China has made efforts to provide data and assistance to several countries, but if it wants to restore its image, it should be fully transparent.

What we need is a war economy. An all-out war against the pandemic. We need to concentrate on providing all the necessary tools for our health workers. An immediate response is required by drawing up new budget lines in order to support the industries that suffered the most from the current economic debacle such as the travel, tourism, transportation, entertainment businesses and other sectors. Small and medium size industries are the most vulnerable. The liberal economy may have to make way for more interventionist policies.

Companies and schools are already establishing flexible rules to work or study remotely and this may be a forthcoming staple in our lives. This crisis is pushing the digital economy into the forefront, which produces its own challenges. Unemployment will nevertheless rise steeply and the role of the state to redress the suffering may need to also increase. It has become evident that economic recovery will require the support of the state. The IMF, the World Bank and other international financial institutions will be necessary to fund these efforts. We shall see if their efforts will suffice. We are on a new page of human history. How we write the future will depend on how we cooperate globally, synchronize our efforts and maximise our potential.

Changes in our lives, permanent or not, will depend on how long the crisis lasts. How governments respond will also determine their future. We are still learning each day something new about COVID-19. Each country has different experiences which should be consolidated and evaluated properly. The international community should garner these lessons and starting with the United Nations and the WHO, should re-establish guidelines and how to approach future disasters, whether natural or manmade. A special session of the UN should be called for. Differences must be overcome, especially those between the biggest economies and an emergency mechanism must be established.

Solidarity, transparency and international collaboration are the most essential elements to overcome adversities. On top of all this is the absolute necessity to rely on science. The authorities should heed warnings from experts and not be reluctant to take pre-emptive action. Proper education in hygiene and personal behaviour as well as common sense will be decisive on our survival. This is just the beginning of a new era and the sooner we are ready for the next disaster, the quicker we will be able to overcome it. Otherwise we will let the next crisis rearrange our lives just as COVID-19 is doing right now.