

**N K SINGH**

*Sunday, January 01, 2006*

from the ringside

### **A new year beyond resolutions**

We usher the new year with a nominal one-second adjustment to compensate for the wobbly planet. Unfortunately, a much deeper correction is necessary to compensate for our wobbly policies. Will 2006 usher a healthier and happier world than the year we have left behind? To make the world a better place we need a more enduring response to some key concerns;

- First, the economic and social consequences of aging. The crisis of aging in mature societies, simultaneously with the problems of the young in the developing world, needs a coherent response. Japan, Europe and the USA face a decline in fertility rates with increased ratio of old to the young, with growing problems of inadequate workforce even compensating for productivity enhancing advancements, a crumbling healthcare systems with rising costs, declining consumption and savings at the same time for asymmetric reasons. Social security schemes are under increased strain, which involve moral choices on inter-generational resource allocation. The comparatively young demography in Asia, particularly India and China, and large parts of Africa have different set of problems of skill inculcation with investment in human resource development, and meaningful employment for new labour force entrants. Rising savings and a propensity to improve life quality prompt migration within their country, their region or to the more developed countries. Continuous relocation of economic activity, apart from technological limitations, may become cost inefficient. Accepting and integrating large migrations create serious problems of lifestyle and cultural imbalances, threatening cohesiveness of societies. The implications of managing and preparing for a aging world go far beyond the resolutions of either the First World Assembly on Aging (Vienna) 1982 or the Second World Assembly (Madrid) 2002, namely to implement an integrated plan even while technology paradigms constantly alter choice patterns.
- Second, global warming, namely that while Earth's temperature, with rapid global warming over the past 30 years, "is now passing through a peak level of Holocene, a period of relatively stable climate that has existed for more than 10,000 years", any further warming by more than one degree Celsius will make the earth warmer than in a million years. This results in serious climatic change, environmental degradation, which will unsettle civilisational patterns and energy-driven economic activity. Drawing solace that in the planet's history these are reversible changes or data is either exaggerated or inconclusive detracts a resolute response to complex challenges. As Nikito Loquinine, the chairman of the World Commission on Protected Areas, says "as glaciers recede and disappear, water will become scarce, droughts will increase and farm crops will fail. The ice on Africa's Mt. Kilimanjaro is nearly gone, conflicts are inevitable, we cannot live without water; can hope that our children have some to drink". While this may happen, large parts of the world in the interim may get submerged with rising sea levels; agriculture and habitation patterns making difficult and unwholesome readjustment. An implementation plan must look beyond the resolutions of Kyoto Protocol or the just-concluded meeting

on climate change in Montreal.

- Third, connected with the above, the need for efficient energy policy, which decreases dependence both on fossil fuel and energy intensity to sustain current lifestyle. Drawing comfort that there are vast unexplored, untapped sources of oil and gas in environmentally more hazardous areas postpone massive investments in alternative fuels and alternative ways of economic production. Can we lead an acceptably healthy, long life span which does not need so much energy? Inefficient energy pricing, and distortionary cross-subsidy structures have untenable consequences. Expecting the highest wasters to economise, optimise and seek alternatives may spare conflicts to secure energy at desired prices in a self defeating competitive race.

- Fourth, the number of people who will fail to achieve the minimum prescribed in Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in terms of poverty, longevity and other key indicators in the Human Development Index remain alarming. Renewed interest to funnel higher resources to Africa, to improve healthcare and redress poverty needs remain well below the acceptable minimum. The diluted UN resolution on the achievement of the MDGs at the recent session of the UN General Assembly has some brave words with inadequate resource commitments. Further there are unresolved problems of implementation and enhancing the reach and capability of multilateral financial institutions to meet their vastly enlarged obligations.

Raging ethnic conflicts, growing religious intolerance, vain attempts to replicate preferred political and economic institutions with an enhanced sense of insecurity are simultaneous consequences of decadent leisure societies alongside with abject poverty. The numerous resolutions on human rights and humanitarian approaches on suffering adopted by various agencies of the United Nations appear grossly inadequate to arrest this new phase of intolerance.

Global commitment to address these challenges must go beyond resolutions. It must go beyond diplomatic skills in adopting finely balanced outcomes. One can be cynical that individual or national self-interest always overrides compassion and empathy is never deep enough to conquer detractions. Nonetheless, the New Year must begin on a note of optimism. Can 2006 be somewhat different?

Wishing my readers a very Happy New Year.

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