Each new morn

New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows

Strike heaven on the face….”

Shakespeare’s lines, which once described Scotland’s sorrows under his tragic hero Macbeth, resonate widely in our unfortunate world today.

The Russia-Ukraine war, as seemingly endless as the flat landscape in which it is being waged, has claimed a million dead and wounded in its 30 months. There are several pathways to its escalation but not even one faintly credible way to peace. An expanded NATO is trying to face down the Russian bear, bleeding under sanctions but dangerously aggressive. Drone strikes into Russia, including on Moscow, and the invasion of Kursk have upped the ante; direct attack on Russian territory by NATO-supplied long distance missiles is only a hair trigger away. Russian reaction is unpredictable, but its ferocity can be guaranteed. History—that easily forgotten lesson—shows that adversity only makes the Russians fight harder, and feel prouder. Enough hints have been dropped about Russia’s nuclear option. The wise would heed such hints; only the foolish laugh them away.

The Middle East has opened its own window on hell. A year after October 7, the killing has not stopped; daily destruction is the accepted norm. The indiscriminate targeting of civilians, the bombing of rubble, the targeting of school shelters and ambulances no longer stir the global conscience. Competing narratives about the Holy Land, the moral entitlement for historical justice, blame and counter-blame sound shrill and unconvincing. Gaza has once again become a metaphor. The Book of Judges tells of the Israelite warrior-judge Samson who ends up blinded—or in Milton’s words, “eyeless in Gaza”. Bound to a huge millstone, he can only drag himself around in futile circles, until in anger he pulls down the temple of the Philistines, killing both them and himself.

Genuine anger post the October 7 attack has been converted into a strategic opportunity by a leadership powered by cynical self-preservation and misplaced messianic zeal. Israel is today eyeless in Gaza, locked in a futile war from which no good will come—neither for the Arab nor for the Jew. Even in the ancient game of an

eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, the dice can be heavily loaded, especially when international humanitarian law lies in tatters. As do the prospects of lasting regional peace. Or of normalisation between Israel and the Arab states. Or of a state for the Palestinians. Things are not likely to get any better; in fact, they are bound to get much worse. No one knows where the escalation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah will stop. Regional war is closer than it has ever been since 1973.

Meanwhile, seemingly on another burning planet, nearly 70 million people in southern Africa spread across Zambia, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Namibia, Lesotho… face death by deadly drought, triggered by El Nino and extreme climate conditions. Zimbabwe will cull 200 of its elephants to relieve food insecurity; Namibia has a target of 700 animals, including 83 elephants, to help feed its people.

Foreign assistance has been niggardly: the European Union has given 22 million euros (as against 40 billion euros to Ukraine, besides bilateral European funding); the World Food Programme is struggling to raise even $400 million. The US, having earmarked $175 billion for Ukraine (and $12.5 billion for Israel over and above the annual assistance of $3.8 billion), has doled out less than a hundred million dollars to Zambia, Zimbabwe and Namibia.

As in Macbeth’s Scotland, there is another drought, that of empathy and vision. Most people can work for national interest; it takes statesmen to worry about humanity. We await their coming.