

DUBAI EXPO 2020

A place free of greed, grandstanding



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THIS is a tale of two worlds. In one, the sun shines bright, the infrastructure is magnificent and the people all get along.

Harmony, cooperation and brotherhood all come together in a well-planned symphony of individuals, corporations, governments and international organisations.

It is a world more than a decade in the making; a world that was built by man from steel, wood and synthetic materials, rising up from the barren sand dunes of a tiny yet rich Middle Eastern country to provide a glimpse into the best that humanity can offer.

Welcome to Dubai Expo 2020, where there are 191 countries in existence and other non-state ac-

tors like DPWorld and the United Nations. Drawing to a close, the world expo in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, provides a safe cocoon to visitors, staff and performers alike.

Some 11 million people have reportedly visited the expo since it opened on Sept 30 last year, delayed a year because of the pandemic. It's unlikely to see the 25 million visitors projected when the UAE made its bid in 2013, but even conservative figures put the final count at 18 million to 20 million visitors when the expo closes its doors on March 31 this year.

Every night, the crowds congregate beneath the gigantic Al Wasl dome, the centrepiece of the expo. At a towering 67m, the dome is actually a 360° theatre that comes to life as the sun starts to set.

Crowds would be transfixed in wonder as the dazzling display shows off not only multiple shapes and colours, but also 3D scenic mosques, creatures of nature and extraordinary landscapes as the *azan* resonates majestically.

The Israel pavilion, nestled be-

tween India and Italy, has no exhibitions but attracts crowds to its rectangular reflective-themed structure.

Palestine, just down the avenue, is housed in a square and somewhat unimaginative building, yet still attracts enough visitors to matter.

The Russia pavilion awed the throng with its centrepiece of the human brain and the neurons that connect it, running on the theme of cooperation.

The Ukraine pavilion, at least four floors high, is a tribute to being "smart" — how a smart life means efficient use of resources and how problems cannot be solved by individual nations.

Which brings us to the second world in our tale of tales. This is the world outside of the Dubai Expo 2020, where it sometimes rains water and sometimes missiles.

It is a world where people are forced to flee because of their leaders' arrogance and bravado.

A world where people must not stand too close to each other for fear of a virus, named after the year 2019. It is a world where there is a price to pay for defiance and disrespect.

This is the world that in 2018 saw Iranian president, Hassan

Rouhani, warning United States president Donald Trump about playing with the tail of a lion. It is a world where the phrase "don't poke a sleeping bear" means so much more than an English-language idiom — the "bear"

being Mother Russia in international relations.

Events of 1914 and 1939 have shown us just how devastating it could be for countries to choose a side. But this is what the Western media want the others to do — choose a side and make sure that it is their side. This is the world in which, as my friend Professor Kuik keeps harping on, hedging your bets is perhaps the best strategy for survival. For a time at least.

It is the world's only fair where both aggressor and defender nations have their own pavilions...

The Dubai Expo 2020 is set to register more "firsts" than were originally intended. It was the first world expo to be held in the Middle East and North Africa, the first to be held under a global pandemic. The expo went on hiatus from 1915 to 1929 as the Spanish flu raged.

It is the world's only fair where both aggressor and defender nations have their own pavilions: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics declined to participate in the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle, the US, which went on despite the Cuban Missile Crisis.

As news of the unfurling events between Russia, Ukraine and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation filtered in, Dubai Expo remained relatively untouched as if the expo grounds existed outside of the real world.

Give me the expo world any day. Fleeting though it may be, it still gives the optimists among us a peek into what can be achieved in a world free from greed and grandstanding.

The writer is a foreign service officer, with views on international affairs