

Whenever there is a **certain concurrency of events**, people are prone to seeking out its deeper meaning. Well, probably, because that there is a deeper something to discover.

A mere six hours ago a meeting of the **Inter-Agency Task Force on Chernobyl** took place on the other side of the globe. The subject in question is the United Nations think-tank and operations centre on Chernobyl. This meeting is an annual occurrence but for the first time it got out of its cozy New York location to be convened in the capital of Belarus, Minsk.

At almost the same time here in New York we inaugurate a **collection of moving and mesmerising images** that were born in the very heart of the Chernobyl disaster and preserved for posterity by a **brave artist** with a **sharp inquisitive eye** and a **compassionate heart**.

Myself, I do not believe in coincidences in life. ‘Random’, ‘accidental’, ‘out of the blue’ are all just **convenient euphemisms** for describing the unknown and the incomprehensible.

What one has to make of these **two perspectives** on the largest man-made nuclear disaster in the history of mankind – one institutional and another artistic – **juxtaposed** with each other?

Positively charged, the current international strategy on Chernobyl marks a major **shift from emergency humanitarian assistance** to the multilateral **engagement focused on social and economic development** of the affected regions.

‘Recovery’ and ‘sustainable development’ are the words of the day. ‘Overcoming’ and ‘getting back to normal life’ express the essence of this approach. One can hardly have a reason to put the blame on human psyche one of which major defensive mechanisms from emotional overload is **the ability to forget**.

If there is one thing that the striking – because so much honest – photographic works of Philip Grossman are unable to do it is **to induce forgetfulness**. These pictures are meant to stick in your memory.

The visually moving ‘Earth after People’ imagery is meant to **bother and disturb**.

The name of Philip Grossman’s exhibition ‘500,000 Voices of Chernobyl’ refers to half a million people of the former Soviet Union who were involved in recovery efforts. Risking their life, risking the future of their children but making an ultimate sacrifice in the name of life and future for their people. In Russian these people were called ‘**liquidators**’.

The sad irony of this linguistic definition is that unlike the conventional disasters of yore – the fire that could be put down, the ruined city that could be cleared up and restored – the consequences of **this** disaster can never be fully overcome, they **cannot be liquidated**. The consequences of the Chernobyl and like disasters can only be **mitigated** and **minimised**.

Another tragic circumstance explains why you have a Belarusian ambassador addressing this distinguished audience on a disaster that occurred in another country, Ukraine.

Because of the cross boundary nature of aftermath of nuclear disasters Belarus received **60 per cent of the entire radioactive fallout**. Of all Chernobyl-contaminated territories **70 per cent** happen to be in Belarus... The exclusion zone could not be reverted to human use for centuries, if ever.

It would not be wise to question the down-to-earth practicality and expediency of the international community’s **desire to deal away** with the consequences of the disaster, to **leave this sad story behind**.

But it would be **heartless** to forget. It would be **careless** to misinterpret or **ignore the lesson of Chernobyl**. And, I am sure, there was a lesson meant for all of us.

The pictures of urban and biological decay, daunting abandonment and doom as caught by Philip Grossman are virtually **soaked with the bitterness** of the place the author risked his life to visit and document. Another telling non-coincidence – Chornobil is the Ukrainian for ‘*wormwood*’. It cannot really get more bitter than that.

Yet I am inclined to read **the real message** that emanates from the photographic art of Philip Grossman **not as doom and gloom**.

For me it is the very convincing revelation of the true extent of **fragility of physical life** and **frailty of the human condition**. Whatever grand ideas of self-importance we may get into our heads, we will never be omnipotent.

Whenever we approach in good faith an **understanding of our limitations**, whenever we come to accept **humility** as a virtue, we are shone a little **guiding light** of hope and wisdom.

With this Earth, it is pretty much like with the famed Swiss watch: we never actually own it, we just take care of it for the next generation.

The artistic perspective and talent of Philip Grossman make us acutely aware of this important message.