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OpEd: Superstorm Sandy sounds a warning of troubles ahead

By Douglas Roche, Edmonton Journal November 2, 2012

The night before my scheduled departure for New York, TV newscasts showed the path of hurricane Sandy heading toward the Atlantic seaboard. I can take a day's disruption in New York, I said to myself, and went ahead with the trip. I was in complete denial of Sandy's potential for wreaking havoc.

The world quickly saw the devastation along the New Jersey shoreline and the breakdown of virtually all services in Manhattan. But the meaning of what Sandy was all about extends far beyond the east coast of the U.S.

Urban centres everywhere need to pay attention. Sandy taught us a powerful lesson. Cities cannot cope with disasters of this magnitude.

I was stunned by what I saw in New York. Total gridlock on the streets. One-quarter of the city without power for three days. Subway, bridges, tunnels and airports closed. Schools and businesses shut down. Whole areas flooded. Hundreds of homes on fire. Hospitals evacuated. Four-hour lineups just to get on a bus or buy gas. And, of course, many people killed.

"I've never seen anything like this," a veteran firefighter said on TV. I've been going back and forth to New York for 60 years and I never have either. Tension and anxiety showed on the faces of just about everyone.

We think of tropical storms affecting the Caribbean and nearby areas. Lately, they've been moving north, affecting the U.S. mainland and the Canadian Maritimes. LaGuardia airport going under water in Sandy's wake was a dramatic signal of rising sea levels.

The debate about global warming has broken out anew. Whether global warming directly produced Sandy is hard to say. But meteorologists are warning that more Sandys are coming. This week made clear that big cities are increasingly vulnerable and cannot cope with massive disruption. Infrastructures and survival services everywhere need to be built up, but there's no money and little vision.

Sandy was a foretaste of what's ahead and all of us should come out of denial.

Modern life is challenged by two paramount threats of the 21st century: global warming and the spread of nuclear weapons. Both are capable of inflicting mayhem on whole populations. The two threats posed by higher temperatures moving northward and the existence of 20,000 nuclear weapons are real, but the public generally appears oblivious.

Why should civilizations tolerate such massive threats when we have the technology and political mechanisms to avert catastrophes? Governments — and the voters supporting them — do little to head off problems before they happen, then fall over themselves trying to deal with disaster once it happens.

How much pressure can the economy of modern societies withstand before becoming totally dysfunctional? This is not just a question of traffic jams or the corner store running out of bread and milk. It's a question of how highly urbanized areas can deal with the collapse of the infrastructure of everyday life.

After a few days of frustration, I got out of New York, but I learned to listen more attentively to meteorologists. Maybe Sandy will get us out of our denial about the effects of big problems ahead.

Douglas Roche is a former Canadian senator and diplomat.

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