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WITH all the conflict and suffering seen this year, the New Year's wish for "peace and goodwill" has never seemed so desirable and so short in supply. In a video message the other day, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres gave a bleak review of the past 12 months. "2023 has been a year of enormous suffering, violence, and climate chaos," he said. "Humanity is in pain. Our planet is in peril. 2023 is the hottest year on record."

Still, he hopes that the world can rebuild and restore hope in humanity next year and perhaps beyond. He said that "... pointing fingers and pointing guns lead nowhere." He added, "Humanity is strongest when we stand together. 2024 must be a year for rebuilding trust and restoring hope. We must come together across divides for shared solutions. For climate action. For economic opportunity and a fairer global financial system that delivers for all."

Mr. Guterres alluded to but did not mention Israel and its ongoing military operation in the West Bank. Although the global economy has been insulated from that conflict, at least so far, the mounting death toll of civilians, particularly women and children, should not be ignored. Of course, the Hamas terrorist attack last Oct. 7, 2023 deserves to be condemned in the strongest terms. But in the spirit of the holiday season — and for humanity's sake — we pray for peace for all the people there.

They include some Filipinos, not just former hostages of Hamas but also spouses of Palestinians still stuck there. Their involvement is a reminder that conflict can touch practically everyone.

Something similar may be said about the war in Ukraine. Two years after the Russian invasion, many countries are still feeling the economic pinch from that theater, particularly in grain shortages and continuing global supply chain disruptions. And as many people remember, the fighting there weighed down economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

In his message, Mr. Guterres said the world needs to come together to address our common problems. He highlighted climate change, but there are many other urgent concerns, including extreme poverty and all other social ills that are rooted from that.

Hopefully, enough leaders everywhere are listening to the secretary-general and others who have given a similar message. The time for action is now.

Working together

The secretary-general's message should resonate in the Philippines and across the region. As everyone knows, unresolved territorial disputes in the West Philippine Sea are simmering and may boil over in 2024.

Clearly, there are no easy solutions. The Philippines should defend its territory against other countries, particularly China whose claim covers the exclusive economic zones of several Southeast Asian countries. But protecting national interests should be balanced with the equally important need for sustained economic growth. Just imagine, foreign investors are likely to avoid

places where conflict could flare up. Policymakers should keep that in mind, even as Filipinos bristle at Chinese ships harassing small Filipino fishermen or firing water cannons at Philippine ships.

Additionally, the Philippines, along with the rest of the world, should keep an eye on North Korea. Recently, its supreme leader called for his countrymen to prepare for war, as if their existence is under threat. Such paranoia is hard to ignore, especially since North Korea has ballistic missiles and an illicit nuclear weapons program.

As mentioned in previous editorials, war in the Korean peninsula will be catastrophic. Actual fighting in Ukraine and recently in Israel have eclipsed the potential danger there, but the situation is worrisome because war in the Korean peninsula will likely draw in the superpowers.

Mr. Guterres urged us to work together on problems affecting all of humanity. That may sound like a seasonal cliché, but the start of a new year is an occasion to hope for something worthwhile.

"The United Nations will keep rallying the world for peace, sustainable development, and human rights. Let's resolve to make 2024 a year of building trust and hope in all that we can accomplish together."

Wise words from a wise man, whose holiday wish is a moral imperative.