

Between the sea of tranquillity and the promise of tomorrow

Dear Tingasiga:
The moment is permanently etched in a memory that I frequently retrieve with ease. July 20, 1969. The Moon, shining bright as it had always done, was host to visitors from Earth, whose race and tribe and pride was one with mine. "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," Neil Armstrong intoned from the Sea of Tranquility, an area of the Moon that would soon become part of our identity.

The broken voice of a man with an American accent, crackling through the static from 384,400 kilometres away, became the single most spectacular experience for me that year. It is yet to be surpassed by any of the numerous scientific marvels that I have beheld since.

We celebrated the event with joy that seemed to dull the pain of the reality of human folly back on Earth. We called it a universal triumph, a moment of shared human glory — not just an achievement of the Americans. The Moon did not belong to America. It rose over Kampala, the same as it rose over Accra, over Helsinki, over Melbourne, over every place where humans stood and looked up and wondered. Whatever those men were standing on — that grey, silent, impossible ground — it was not theirs. It was everyone's. It was not theirs. It was the Moon.

Here on Earth, human folly was on full display, our actions a steadfast regression powered by greed, violence, and giant egos. Wars were rendering millions of people dead, injured, or homeless, and making a mockery of humanity's claim to be better than wild animals.

The folly of it all was encapsulated in a photograph taken from the lunar surface on July 20, 1969, showing the stark, colourless terrain of the Moon stretching to a knife-sharp horizon, and beyond it — impossibly small, impossibly blue — Earth. The planet hanging in absolute blackness like a marble someone had forgotten in an enormous dark room. Every human being who had ever lived, every war ever fought, every symphony ever written, every scientific discovery ever made, every child ever born, all of it contained in that

small, glowing sphere. Its details completely invisible, even irrelevant, to the three men of the Apollo 11 Mission, who were somewhere else, far from the mess that we called home.

Apollo 11 was not merely a feat of engineering. It was a reconfiguration of the possible. For us who watched Neil Armstrong descend that ladder, something fundamental shifted. The world had always had an edge, a limit where imagination surrendered to reality. On July 20, 1969, that edge moved. It moved nearly three hundred and fifty thousand kilometres away, and suddenly the distance between a dream and a destination felt negotiable in a way it never had before.

Something genuinely leaped that day. We were inspired and energised to aim higher than the ordinary horizon. The generation of high school students who marvelled at the Moon walkers became medical doctors, veterinary doctors, engineers, other scientists, teachers, lawyers, and dreamers who carried that sense of the possible forward through decades of smaller, ordinary ambitions.

The Apollo Mission programme ended in December 1972. Humanity continued its parallel paths of positive exploration and self-destructive folly. We now have deep-space telescopes and unmanned space explorers sending us spectacular information that would have been considered heresy a few hundred years ago. Voyager 1, which departed Earth in September 1977, is about 25 billion kilometres from here, hurtling through interstellar space at 60,000 kilometres per hour. Its ultimate destination unknown. Fated to roam the interstellar space long after humanity and Earth have withered into the permanent darkness of immeasurable time.

Meanwhile, the dream of many good men and women has come to fruition with Artemis II, humanity's first crewed lunar mission in more than half a century. It is a mission that uplifts our spirits at this moment of heightened human folly on Earth. What with the insanity of the rulers of Sudan, South Sudan, Congo Free State, United States of America, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Russia, Ukraine, Myanmar, and other rivers of blood!

In Sudan, and South Sudan, one of the worst humanitarian crises on the planet unfolds with insufficient global attention.



Muniini K. Mulera
Letter to a Kampala Friend



Artemis II carries the weight of everything the intervening decades have taught us about ourselves: about the importance of including every kind of human voice in the stories we tell about exploration, about the long cost of abandoning ambition, and about what it means to reach again for something enormous after a long season of turning inward.

The mission's crew — four astronauts aboard a small vessel — are travelling farther from our planet than any humans since the Apollo era. They are already looking back at that same small blue marble, and they are sending us messages about a love for Earth that only distance seems to provide. They are describing, once again, our fragile planet, hanging in a vast darkness, people by billions, at the mercy of a few people, many of them ruthless, selfish, and oblivious to their very transient sojourn here.

To the astronauts on Artemis II, everything we are currently doing to one another is invisible. The wars are invisible. The displacement camps are invisible. The political struggles in Uganda and elsewhere are invisible. The hospitals treating children for injuries no child should know are invisible. The Earth appears to them as something one could blot out with one's thumb.

That is the paradox: at the precise historical moment when humanity is reaching farther into the

cosmos than it has in half a century, it is also engaged in a sustained demonstration of its least evolved capabilities. The wars on Earth in 2026 are not new. But the simultaneity of Artemis and ongoing global conflict creates a dissonance that invites focused reflection.

In Sudan, and South Sudan, one of the worst humanitarian crises on the planet unfolds with insufficient global attention. Millions displaced, and tens of thousands killed, while the world's cameras point to the drama of war in areas whose people are presumably more human than Africans. Yet the people in Africa, Persia, Middle East, and Europe are killing and being killed for the same reasons — power, land, ethnicity, fear, resource, pride, and the oldest and most mundane motive in human history: because those in authority decided it was useful.

Artemis II and the wars happening simultaneously on Earth are both expressions of the same species — a species of astonishing, self-defeating duality. We are the creature that composed sublime music and invented the cluster bomb. That built the Pyramids and engineered famine as a weapon. That mapped the human genome and runs human trafficking networks. That has built a spacecraft capable of carrying human beings farther from Earth than any in fifty years, while simultaneously operating drones and missiles designed to kill people in their sleep.

Artemis II will not change human behaviour. However, its photographs of Earth will, hopefully, make us feel, albeit briefly, that the international borders are absurd, that the violence is unnecessary, that from far enough away, we are simply one small, lit thing in an enormous darkness, and the only remotely sensible response to that fact is to take care of each other.

That feeling will last approximately as long as it takes to read the rest of this paragraph. However, I hope that the sane among us will continue the hard, earthbound work of becoming worthy of that feeling.

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