

Overcrowded continents

What to do about population explosion in a nation like India? Pope John Paul was there earlier this month and took pains to denounce artificial birth control. In the few minutes that the Pope spoke against birth control, more than 400 new Indians were born.

India and Africa illustrate the problem facing opponents of birth control in the Third World. In 1930, India (and what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh) had 335 million people. By 1980 the number had risen to 673 million in India alone. By the year 2000, India will have a population of 975 million.

Add in Pakistan and Bangladesh and the awesome grand total is 1.264 billion people.

What this means is that in 70 years the population of the Indian subcontinent will have virtually doubled. This meteoric rate of growth, fueled by advances in public health and better nutrition, will slow somewhat. Still, by 2000 India will have a population density of over 400 people per square kilometre — or 200 times that of Canada.

By best estimates, the population of the Indian subcontinent — India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Burma — will exceed that of China by the end of this century.

Africa, plagued by famine and disease, faces an even worse situation. In 1950 the African continent had 222 million people. By 1975 the figure had grown to 467 million. In 2000 the estimate almost doubles to 830 million.

Egypt is probably the worst case of over-population. Before World War II there were 14 million people. By 1980 the figure had risen to 40 million. In 2000 Egypt will have 61 million people crammed into fertile land the size of the state of Maryland.

An Africa that cannot feed itself today will face

Punch



"Give me your honest response, Flieder. Do I come across as needing a lot of reassurance from my fellow workers?"

ERIC MARGOLIS



almost unimaginable catastrophe by 2000 if its population continues to grow at the present rate. It seems that the only hope for the continent is a Malthusian solution: Reduction of overpopulation by war, famine and disease.

All of those starving black babies seen nightly on TV are nature's way of eliminating people who are unable to feed themselves. Saving these babies today may well condemn the next generation of African babies to starvation.

The ethics of birth control are debatable in North America and Europe where populations have stabilized. In Asia and Africa, the choice is stark: Either enforce birth control or cull excess population through war and disease. Otherwise famine will not only carry off the weak but may also cause massive political and economic damage.

China has recognized this problem and taken draconian measures. Chinese families are virtually forced into having no more than one child. The one-child program may work in totalitarian China where state control is absolute; in democratic India or chaotic Africa, there is simply no chance of enforcing such a program.

Africa could feed a much larger population but cannot. India will find it extremely difficult to feed nearly one billion people. Bangladesh, already living hand to mouth, cannot feed new millions.

Compounding this problem, it has proven almost impossible to get traditional farm societies anywhere except China to practise birth control. In nations without pensions, medical schemes or unemployment, a person's only refuge in old age or sickness is the family.

With population mounting inexorably and birth control programs unlikely, what are these nations to do? Invade their neighbors and seize more land or somehow allow a certain percentage of their people to die. Cruel this may be, but it is the old problem of too many people in the lifeboat — some will have to go overboard.

One answer may be to cut back on public health programs so that infant mortality rises to a level sufficient to maintain a static population. Such a program is, after all, no more than we routinely advocate for control of wild animal populations.

Remember that it is man's interference in nature's cycle of birth and death — via drugs and inoculation — that has caused problems of overpopulation in Africa and Asia.

Westerners will likely be outraged by these thoughts. But anyone who has been to Cairo or Calcutta recently, who has seen people swarming like ants in a jar, will quickly understand that something drastic must be done. If not artificial birth control then nature's version: Disease, starvation and war.