

Population Matters

A visit to the slums of the poorest of the poor makes the case

by William B. Dickinson

December is the month for year-enders, those journalistic exercises that try to make sense of mankind's crimes and foibles over the previous twelve months. The consensus will be that 2001 was a slum of a year punctuated by the September 11 "Attack on America" that turned everything on its head. We are trying to parse the illogic of terrorism to figure out where we can go from here with less fear and without the loss of more freedoms, great and small.

Answers are likely to be filtered through the prism of our special interests. Grinding poverty in Third World countries, rapid urbanization, endemic official corruption, the hopelessness felt by legions of youth trying to enter the work force, the rise of religious fundamentalism in the absence of that hope – all these will be seen as contributors to the current global malaise.

I believe that there is a common denominator: overpopulation. In the wake of September 11, this issue has been touched on only in passing in most analyses and dispatches. It's as if poverty, hopelessness, corruption, and fundamentalism existed in isolation from a core cause. We hate statistics, especially those that smack of inevitability. How are we to come to grips with a future that projects a rise in world population from 6.1 billion today to nearly 9 billion in just 49 years? Even worse, what's to be done when ninety percent of that population growth concentrates in poor nations?

A Telling Snapshot

William B. Dickinson has served as manager of the Washington Post Writers Group and currently holds the Manship Chair in mass communications at Louisiana State University. He continues to be associated with the Biocentric Institute at Airlie, Virginia, for which this essay was written. It is reprinted by permission from his December 2001 newsletter.

Before addressing the possible solutions, we should look with open eyes at the conditions of the poorest of the poor. I asked TV journalist Mike Beardsley, back from a foundation-sponsored stint in Kenya, to describe the conditions there. Beardsley spent most of the last four years abroad in Eastern Europe and Africa. Still, Nairobi's Kibera Slums, home to one million people who have fled drought and joblessness in the countryside, was special in its horrors.

"We rode a dilapidated mini-bus out from the city center," Beardsley recalls. "We mounted a small rise to get an overlook. The slum stretched out before us, through valleys, up over hills, for miles. Hundreds of thousands of dwellings, mostly mud and wood construction, are built smack up against each other. I did not see a single house that did not have holes in the wall, many patched with rags and discarded pieces of cardboard or newspapers. It was a stunning sight.

"Thousands of dirt walkways meander throughout Kibera, some of them wide enough for two people to walk shoulder to shoulder, but many narrower than that. It's impossible to walk without leaving a cloud of dust. When it rains, the dirt turns into gumbo. Smoke from cooking fires curled into the air. Many families had fires outside. Tons of litter. There is no garbage pickup. Countless plastic bags, rotting remnants of food, cans and broken glass built up into garbage heaps. No running water, no sewage facilities. Ditches reek of human waste. It's not unusual for small fires to spread quickly from house to house. Police fear to enter the slums, so lawlessness and vigilantes rule the day...I have seen many poor slums before in many parts of the world, but the vastness of Kibera and the resigned hopelessness of the people forced to live in such conditions was overwhelming."

Kibera's daily horrors are duplicated in slums throughout the world, even in nations we associate with economic progress. Why are we surprised at the consequences? As far back as 1986, the Vice

President's Task Force on Combating Terrorism pointed out that fully sixty percent of the Third World population was under twenty years of age, and concluded: "These population pressures create a volatile mixture of youthful aspirations that, when coupled with economic and political frustrations, help form a large pool of potential terrorists." Then-Vice President George H. W. Bush, father of our current president, headed the task force.

Werner Fornos, president of the Population Institute, recently described the 1986 report as one of chilling accuracy, and noted: "Consider that at the time that was written, virtually every one of the men who hijacked the four American jetliners on September 11 was in that very age category." Today's score or more of civil wars, ethnic cleansing, resource grabs – call them what you will – are related to demographic destinies propelled by overpopulation.

A New Look at Migration

Terrorism is one way that the population fallout reaches the shores of rich nations. Migration of desperate people is another. In the wake of September 11, Washington professes – shock! shock! – to find that immigration laws have been flouted by those here on student or tourist visas. President Bush on October 29 ordered a crackdown on foreign student visas. "We're going to start asking a lot of questions that heretofore have not been asked," he said.

It's about time. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) figures show that some 300,000 foreigners have been issued deportation orders but have simply vanished. Census Bureau statistics suggest that eight million foreigners live illegally in the United States. Even *The New York Times*, which has championed the cause of illegal immigrants year after year, on October 5 endorsed a crackdown "on lax enforcement of the immigration laws, with a sense of urgency." Shame on states such as Tennessee and Michigan that have been routinely issuing drivers' licenses to applicants who are in the country illegally, arguing that it's not the states' job to help enforce national immigration laws.

Migration by those who can afford airfares and the price charged by smugglers will continue to confront rich nations in the years ahead, and on a greater scale. Indonesia has become a major transshipment point for migrants from the Middle East seeking asylum in Australia. During the summer, Australia felt forced to say it would accept no more refugees. Shiploads were

diverted to Pacific island nations like Nauru, where they remain in indefinite limbo. A flood of asylum seekers on October 30 closed the Channel Tunnel to freight traffic for eleven hours after dozens of Afghans, Iranians, and Iraqi or Turkish Kurds broke into a freight yard near

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Calais and tried to hide on trains bound for Britain. Every year, thousands of asylum seekers try to sneak through the tunnel. Yet these people are only the vanguard of the millions of dispossessed who will press onto rich nations' shores in years to come.

What can we do? Calls are heard for a massive expansion of aid to poor nations. The United States spends only one-tenth of one percent of its gross national product on development assistance. But economic aid will do little to improve the lives of the poor in the long run unless tied to reduced birthrates that match population to resources. Unfortunately, one of President Bush's first acts was to prohibit U.S. aid to UN family-planning programs that allowed abortions.

Some will argue that it is arrogant for the United States to dictate the size of families to other cultures. Let those who so argue go to Kenya and stand on the hill overlooking the Kibera Slums. Let them, at the outset of this new year, look at the growing anarchy and deny that population matters. •