

Ira Mehlman heads the Writer's Support Group at the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR). He attended the U.N. conference he reports on here. Previous articles by Mr. Mehlman appeared in the Fall 1990 and Summer 1991 issues of The Social Contract.

AVOIDING THE OBVIOUS POPULATION GROWTH LEFT OUT OF U.N. CONFERENCE ON COPING WITH INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

By Ira Mehlman

In a recent *Washington Post* profile, Senator Albert Gore, America's leading environmentalist politician, leveled some harsh (and probably politically-motivated) criticism at the Bush administration and a complacent American public on the eve of the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. "Our society is becoming conversant with the concept of denial, which is a mechanism at the boundary between thought and feeling which induces a kind of artificial blindness and amnesia," stated Gore.

What Gore was lamenting is a growing tendency to avoid discussing nettlesome problems or making unsettling changes in the way we live, even as we all acknowledge that we are hurtling headlong and full-speed toward disaster. Though the senator's criticism was directed at the United States, it is evident that the same sort of willful blindness and reluctance to tackle tough issues is an international affliction. Two vital global issues — international migration and global warming — were the topics of U.N.-sponsored conferences in the spring of 1992. The items that weren't discussed at these meetings, the issues that were avoided either deliberately or by tacit agreement, are as important as what was talked about at the U.N. conferences.

Chief among these taboo topics is the issue of population growth. During the May 6-8 conference "On International Aid as a Means to Reduce the Need for Emigration," sponsored by the U.N.'s International Labor Office and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva, Switzerland, the global population explosion was simply not part of the formal agenda.

Whether that omission was by design or merely an oversight is unclear. It's hard to imagine, however, that in all the planning that went into a three-day conference on the global migration crisis, no one thought to include a discussion of the root cause. In light of the revelation that there was a concerted effort on the part of the Vatican to keep the population question off the agenda at Rio, it seems all the more implausible that the failure to address the topic in Geneva was anything but a deliberate attempt to avoid a contentious issue. Instead, the conference focused on the seemingly noncontroversial — promoting economic development in countries of large-scale

emigration. "Economic development" has become the holy grail of our age: a high-minded goal we can all agree upon — but one that cannot be achieved.

To its credit, the Geneva conference made a serious effort to establish some rational guidelines for administering international development aid in a way that actually benefits people in impoverished countries. Throughout the years of the Cold War, international aid had far more to do with geo-political strategy than helping nations or individuals throw off the shackles of poverty. There was also a consensus among both the emigrant-sending countries and immigrant-receiving countries that without tangible results, the future of international development aid could be jeopardized.

Unfortunately, however, political and economic reforms in the developing world — while they are laudable objectives — by themselves will be of little consequence. The simple fact is that their populations and their labor forces are exploding at such an astounding rate that no amount of foreign aid will have more than a marginal impact on the condition of the Third World. Democratization and official respect for human rights will soon be beyond the capacity of many Third World governments, even if they were inclined to institute reforms.

As populations explode, governments in the impoverished regions of the world are becoming increasingly irrelevant. In Peru, for example, which recently experienced political upheaval and an end to its democratic experiment, much of the nation was already beyond the control of the government. In Lima's shanty towns and squatter camps, social and economic power had long since devolved from official government entities. At the time of the military coup, as much as 40 percent of the country's economy was unregulated, untaxed and unanswerable to Peru's official government. Throughout much of the developing world similar subterranean economies and social structures already exist and threaten to supersede the formal power structures. Massive population growth is leading to tribalism and a new form of feudalism, neither of which is conducive to democracy or respect for human rights.

The three days of discussion about how to target development aid so that it has maximum benefit was

an interesting, but in the end, pointless exercise. It was somewhat akin to a prolonged discussion about how many buckets should be purchased to collect the water coming through a leak in the roof, without ever talking about how to fix the hole in the roof. What's more, both of the prime sponsors of the conference, Michel Hansenne, Director General of the ILO and Sadaka Ogata, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as much as said so in their opening remarks.

ILO Director-General Hansenne stressed that the size of the developing world's population and labor force is the greatest obstacle to overcome in reducing international migration. Countries of the developed world "are reluctant to open their borders to what they see as the South's or the East's unlimited supplies of unskilled labor."

Ambassador Ogata went even further in capsulizing the problem of international migration when she observed:

Worldwide, some up to one billion people are now estimated to live in conditions of absolute poverty. Millions of new jobs need to be created each year in developing countries simply to offset demographic growth. As presently constituted, development assistance can, in my view, only hope to have a marginal impact on the staggering economic problems of the Third World and on the broader problems of migration associated with them.

While Ambassador Ogata candidly conceded that pouring massive amounts of development assistance into countries whose population growth far exceeds their potential for economic growth was an exercise in futility, that is precisely what was discussed during the subsequent three days. In almost a non sequitur that seemed to set the tone for the discussions that followed, Ambassador Ogata in her very next sentence opined that, "A comprehensive, long-term strategy embracing trade measures, increased development assistance and debt relief is urgently needed if we are to have any real hope of redressing this situation."

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Thus, while asserting in one breath that growth in the size of the Third World's labor force is the crux of the problem, she inexplicably avoids calling for international assistance in controlling population growth as a necessary prerequisite to coping with the problem. Not only was population control not cited as

the cornerstone of such efforts, as it logically should have been from her analysis of the problem, it was not even an item on the U.N. High Commissioner's list of remedies.

If, as Mrs. Ogata claims, "development aid can ... only hope to have a marginal impact" on the conditions that are behind the unprecedented wave of human migration, what was the purpose of the exercise? Why assemble the world's leading experts for a three-day conference to discuss strategies that will do little to manage the problem, much less solve it? At the root of the international migration crisis is population growth. Until and unless that condition is dealt with, no amount of development aid, no matter how wisely administered, will stem the flow of people seeking economic opportunity and relief from oppression. It was not until the very end of the second day of deliberations that anyone even suggested that development aid ought to include funds for population control, and then it was mentioned only in passing. Dr. Ercan Uygur, a Turkish scholar, suggested that one of the ways its European neighbors could help his country "is to contribute to programs that promote reduction in population growth."

To truly comprehend the futility of discussions that focus on development aid rather than on controlling population, one need only look at the U.N.'s own data. In 1990, the population of the developed world was 1.2 billion, while the underdeveloped world had a population of 4.1 billion. By the turn of the century, the developed world will add about 60 million people, while the underdeveloped nations will have added nearly a billion new people. Thus, the Third World will add the equivalent of nearly the entire developed world's population in just one decade. If one looks at longer term projections to 2025, the population of the developed world is expected to reach 1.35 billion and the underdeveloped world will have a population of 7.15 billion. (These, by the way, are considered conservative projections.)

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If those U.N. projections are anywhere near accurate, the talk of development aid becomes almost laughable. There isn't enough money, jobs cannot be created fast enough, nor are there sufficient resources in the world to keep pace with that kind of population growth. It is sheer delusion on the part of the developed nations to believe that they can pump enough development aid into emigrant sending

countries to convince people to stay at home. According to a report issued by the ILO itself several weeks after the conference, one-third of the world's current labor force — about 800 million people — is either unemployed or working at marginal jobs. Merely coping with the task at hand would be a monumental achievement, much less with the billions of new workers who will be entering the labor market unless controlling population becomes the primary focus of attention.

Beyond the simple fact that international aid could never keep up with demographic growth in the Third World, it could also be a suicidal pursuit. As noted by Rudolf Weiersmuller, the Swiss Ambassador for International Refugee Policy, if the Third World ever attempted to model its development after that of the West, it would have a cataclysmic effect on the health of our planet. The world's three leading economic powers, the United States, Japan and Germany, account for 8.5 percent of global population, but 30 percent of the world's carbon dioxide emissions. Conversely, China and India, the two most populous nations on earth account for 37 percent of world population and only 14 percent of CO² spewed into the atmosphere. We would surely destroy the earth's environment long before these two nations ever achieved economic parity with the industrialized nations.

In an ironic twist, the "solutions" to the crisis discussed in Geneva are precisely the causes of the crisis discussed in Rio. It seems to defy logic that one arm of the United Nations would meet in May to promote the kind of development another arm of the U.N. was scheduled to try to contain in June. Yet, because a frank and rational discussion of the root cause of both the migration and environmental crises — exploding human population — was off the table, both conferences are likely to achieve marginal results at best.

There is no mystery about the causes of mass migration and severe environmental degradation. They are, in fact, malignant symptoms of the same disease: overpopulation in the South and East and overconsumption in the North and West. They are problems that may prove beyond our capacity to solve, but they are certainly not beyond our ability to recognize.

Much of the underdeveloped world (with the now overt encouragement of the Vatican) either can't or won't control their population growth. President Bush, the leader of the developed world, has made it clear that the affluent nations are not prepared to make any significant sacrifices to reduce their disproportional consumption of resources and environmental damage.

And so we have a stand-off. Rather than talk about the real issues, we talk about peripheral matters, careful not to call on anyone to make any real sacrifices. The developed world talks vaguely about

economic assistance it can't afford and which the environment cannot sustain. It refuses to consider true reform of its own industrial and economic infrastructure and a more equitable use of the world's resources. The underdeveloped nations continue to show little resolve in controlling population growth which makes any hope of a better life for their citizens impossible. Instead they have opted for the post-Cold War version of Mutually Assured Destruction in which the developed countries must pay them not to destroy the rain forests and must absorb at least a part of their overflow population.

In the end, avoidance of the core issues will doom the well-intended attempts to come to grips with the twin crises of mass migration and environmental destruction. High-minded discussions about effective administration of international development assistance will not stop the flow of migrants seeking a better life in the developed world, nor will they stop the devastation of our environment. The world must be willing to address the root cause of the phenomena it seeks to alter, regardless of whose sensitivities it might offend. A world of 5.5 billion people, which is awash in migrants and drowning in and choking on its own waste, cannot continue to add a billion people to its population every decade.

The Geneva and Rio conferences were called because the peace and health of our planet are in jeopardy. With the stakes that high, it is irresponsible not to address the population question. It is the least we owe to posterity. ■