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How Much Is That Doggie In the Window? Answer: 2.3 Cents a Minute

By William B. Dickinson

The photograph is of a Chinese boy walking in a park with a small dog on a leash. My daily newspaper ran the photo along with a short Associated Press dispatch: "A walk in the park with a dog is a luxury, not leisure, in Beijing. That's why the Friends of the Dog Park — which rents dogs for 23 cents for 10 minutes — is so popular. China has officially banned the animals because it says the country is too poor to afford them. Some 600 dogs (are) available for rental..."

Welcome to the human face of overpopulation. Perhaps China is "too poor" to allow people to own dogs, but it's just as fair to conclude that the country has "too many people" to afford them. In an effort to rein in its growth, China has a one-child-per-family policy. Even so, its resources are strained to provide for the 1.2 billion people there already. So children rent dogs for 10 minutes to experience a companionship we in richer nations take for granted. How sad. How telling!

For a long time, I thought the crisis of exploding population would not become inescapably apparent until early in the next century. To be sure, the earth now holds 5.7 billion of us, and we are growing at the rate of 1 billion every 10-12 years. Technological development of the Pacific Rim and Latin nations, however, was seen by some as a saving grace. Malthusian misery might be limited for a while longer, allowing nations time to get their population-stabilization act together.

This window of opportunity now may be seen as a chimera. My reading of the news so far this year suggests that in nation after nation, both rich and poor, population pressures have reached critical mass. The slaughter in Rwanda is a sickening reminder of how quickly man turns against man, given a flash point. A mysterious plane crash that killed its Hutu president becomes the excuse for massacres of the rival Tutsi tribe. More than ethnic rivalries are involved here. Homes of the murdered Tutsis are looted — an example of what Vanderbilt University anthropologist Virginia Abernethy has termed "resource grabs" traceable to overpopulation.

Many of us watch "National Geographic" and "Nature" specials on public television. The unvarying lesson of these programs is that the animal kingdom is

regulated by natural imperatives of territory, resources and birthrates. We have no trouble understanding that only so many creatures can survive in a finite place. But we are unwilling to extrapolate from these vivid examples of nature in action. Our conceit is that humans are different: we were given Biblical dominion over baser creatures, and our intelligence and technology will save us from the fate of other animal forms confronted by massive overcrowding.

If so, we had better get cracking. Otherwise, we face what Robert D. Kaplan has called "The Coming Anarchy," characterized by the scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and disease that already are destroying the social fabric of many nations. Kaplan's cover article in *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994) is a horrific preview of the first decades of the 21st century. His trek through West Africa is a detailed look at a future dominated by demographic, environmental and societal stress in which "criminal anarchy emerges as the real 'strategic' danger." It's no coincidence that birthrates in these African countries are at the top of the scale.

Too many people is often the common denominator. Consider Vietnam — as *The New York Times's* Malcolm W. Browne did during a month-long visit in April. In a front page article, May 8, Browne reported that Vietnam "is bursting at the seams with people, and unless the nation can change its demographic, social, and economic trends, the Vietnamese people will face a catastrophe, many experts believe." Since 1975, Vietnam's population has increased by more than 60 percent, to 72 million. Already the twelfth most populous nation on Earth, it could number 168 million by 2025.¹

Common sense tells us that such numbers cannot come to pass. Nature is the final arbiter of existence, and when the environment and quality of life have been sufficiently degraded in a place, balance will be restored, if necessary on killing fields. The behavioral sinks of Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia and the former Soviet Union should be viewed as cautionary tales.

All of this lends urgency to preparation for September's International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo. The conference represents one of the last chances this century to address population/migration issues on global terms. Yet the

preparatory session at the United Nations ended in late April without agreement on abortion, access to contraception by adolescents, and financing.

Meantime, women's groups are stirring the pot by arguing that traditional methods of controlling population growth are demeaning and coercive. They want a new emphasis on expanding health services to include prenatal care, educating girls, and promoting women's equality. As women gain more control over their lives, it is held, they will have fewer children. This argument is not without merit: cultural differences may have more to do with birthrates than does access to contraceptives. But the worry is that the rift between the women's equality advocates and the family planning forces will paralyze the delegates at Cairo.

I suggest we cut through the fog by handing out a copy of that photograph of the Chinese boy and the rented dog. ■

¹ *The Social Contract* published an excerpt from Malcolm Browne's book, *Muddy Boots and Red Socks* in our Spring 1994 edition. It is a chapter entitled "Beware the Third World" beginning on page 186.