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UNFPA SCALES BACK FOR LACK OF FUNDS

by Jaya Dayal

NEW YORK, Jun 1 (IPS) - An acute shortage of funds is forcing the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) to scale back its programmes at a time of escalating demands for increased services.

Executive Director Nafis Sadik said here Tuesday that "UNFPA's funding situation remains a serious concern. As in the past, demands by countries far exceeds available funds."

Sadik told the U.N. Development Programme's Governing Council that total UNFPA income for 1992 was 238.2 million dollars, an increase of only 6.3 percent over the 1991 income of 224 million dollars. Contributions for 1993 are estimated at some 238 million dollars.

Sadik said that "uncertainty about the Fund's resources" was one of the reasons for a 48.4-million-dollar decrease in project funding in 1992. She said the decrease in overall project funding also reflects more cautious programming and "developments beyond UNFPA's control, such as internal strife in a number of countries".

UNFPA says project allocations to Third World

nations decreased from 212 million dollars in 1991 to 163.6 million dollars in 1992. Africa, which is expected to bear 34 percent of future world population growth, was especially hard-hit. Its share of UNFPA activities fell from 32.1 percent in 1991 to 29.7 percent in 1992.

Sadik says in a 1992 report that "the down-turn in UNFPA financial support to population activities in the region during 1992 contributed to a loss of momentum in the implementation of important UNFPA activities in all but 10 of the 41 countries UNFPA supports in Sub-Saharan Africa."

She said "this made it necessary not only to scale down plans to expand activities, but also to seek resources from other donors to cover projects that had already been developed."

In 1992, UNFPA had population-related projects and programmes in 140 countries, field offices in 95 countries and in 37 countries, provided up to two-thirds of all assistance in the population sector. Sadik said the low 1993 funds were a result of an "actual decrease in contributions from some of our traditional donors" in addition to the rising strength of the dollar.

She appealed to both the donor community and developing countries to increase funding for UNFPA in 1993, noting that "contributions from our traditional donors have not increased sufficiently to match programme requirements."

"For donors, all that is needed to start with is to increase the share of official development assistance (ODA) earmarked for population programmes from the minute present level of about one percent."

(continued on page 2)

WARREN CHRISTOPHER TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE IN VIENNA

by Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON, Jun 1 (IPS) - U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher will address the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna Jun. 13, the State Department said here Tuesday.

Jim O'Dea, an officer at Amnesty International USA here, praised Christopher's decision to attend the conference, saying it was "important that the U.S. government represent itself at the highest possible level." The administration of President Bill Clinton will also ask the U.S. Senate to ratify four international conventions signed by former President Jimmy Carter 15 years ago, say U.S. officials.

(continued on page 4)

CONTENTS

UNFPA SCALES BACK FOR LACK OF FUNDS	1
WARREN CHRISTOPHER TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE IN VIENNA	1
AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SAYS HUMAN RIGHTS NOT CULTURE-SPECIFIC	2
EC MOVES TO LIMIT REFUGEES AND EXPEL ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS	3
UNHCR CRITICISES "SAFE" COUNTRY POLICY	3
RICH, POOR WRANGLE	5

2 June 1993

IPS Daily Journal

Vol. 1 No. 67, page 2

Sadik said. "Developing countries must show their commitment by increasing funding for population programmes and for social development in general," she said.

UNFPA maintains that over 300 million women world-wide are without access to safe means of contraception and that if the demand were met, the world's population in 2050 could reach eight to 8.5 billion people -- 1.5 to two billion people less than the United Nations' median projection of 10 billion people.

UNFPA says 1992 saw 105 countries contributing to the Fund, including two first-time donors, Gambia and Liechtenstein, and 1993 saw first-time funds from Costa Rica, Ireland and Namibia. And out of 32 countries that increased their contributions in their national currency by more than 10 percent, roughly half were developing countries, including Burkina Faso, Egypt, Fiji, India, Kenya, Lesotho, Mauritania, Mexico, Nigeria, Panama, Tanzania, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Uganda and Uruguay.

Developed countries that increased their contributions by more than 10 percent included Australia, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Korea, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway, Poland and Spain. Sadik said she was "particularly appreciative of the fact that certain donors notably Australia, Denmark and Germany have been able to maintain and even increase their contributions despite domestic financial constraints."

The annual UNDP Governing Council session, meeting here Jun. 1-18, is expected to endorse 15 UNFPA country programmes and the organisation's 1994-1997 budget. ■

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL SAYS HUMAN RIGHTS NOT CULTURE-SPECIFIC

By Yojana Sharma

HONG KONG, May 31 (IPS) -- The human rights group Amnesty International has refuted the argument of some Asian governments that human rights is a Western concept.

At a meeting of Amnesty's Asia-Pacific Grouping which ended here Monday, researchers from 15 countries said Asian states seeking to portray human rights as a Western value imposed on developing countries were often countries where serious human rights abuses had occurred.

Countless prisoners of conscience languish in prison, hundreds become victims of disappearances or extra-judicial executions, and torture is a daily occurrence in more than 25 countries, Amnesty

said. "In none of these cases did such grave violations reflect the social, cultural and religious values of the country concerned," the human rights group said in a statement. "And in no case did these human rights violations advance the cause of social progress or economic development."

Amnesty is concerned that some Asian governments will use such arguments to undermine internationally recognised standards for human rights at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights to be held in Vienna, Austria, June 14-25.

At the Asia-Pacific human rights meeting in Bangkok in March, several Asian governments issued a declaration stressing that priority should be given to regional, historical, cultural or religious factors. But Amnesty says the prime motivation of such moves to divide up human rights is to protect the authority of the state rather than the right of citizens.

"Where in Asian culture is it permitted for people to be tortured, summarily executed or imprisoned without trial -- nowhere," said Derek Evans, head of Amnesty's Asia-Pacific Research department. Even countries that claim that the so-called collective rights should take precedence over the 'Western' notion of individual rights have hardly come forward to protect such collective rights, he added.

"Amnesty believes the concept of collective rights and individual rights are interdependent. You can't separate the two, and to do so is to destroy the concept of human rights," said Evans.

He said the very people who seek to protect the economic, developmental and collective rights which some Asian governments claim should take precedence over individual rights are the ones who are targeted for persecution by repressive governments.

These include trade union leaders, ethnic minorities and women's groups. "They are all linked to social and economic movements that governments claims should be given priority," noted Evans. "The arguments of these Asian governments break down when you look at the effects of what they are doing," he added. "Torture never contributed to social and economic developments. On the contrary, such violations contributed to a situation where social and economic development is hindered."

While claiming that human rights is a Western concept, many Asian countries fail to acknowledge their own citizens' clamour for respect of civil and political rights. "At the Bangkok meeting more than 150 Asian non-governmental organisations strongly endorsed a commitment to the universality and indivisibility of human rights," says Amnesty.

Amnesty believes all human rights -- political, economic and social -- should be given equal importance by governments. The group says statements like the one issued in Bangkok show that

(continued on page 3)

2 June 1993

IPS Daily Journal

Vol. 1 No. 67, page 3

Asian governments are "more concerned about protecting themselves against so-called outside interference... than taking a constructive position on improving the climate for human rights in their countries."

EC MOVES TO LIMIT REFUGEES AND EXPEL ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS

by Alecia McKenzie

BRUSSELS, Jun 1 (IPS) -- The European Community (EC) took steps Tuesday to limit the number of refugees entering member states and also to expel immigrants working illegally in the Community.

The move came during a meeting of EC interior and justice ministers in Copenhagen called to discuss asylum laws, expulsion provisions and common standards for treating refugees. The EC ministers confirmed an earlier decision that refugees from the former Yugoslavia be resettled in so-called 'safe areas' in the divided country rather than seek haven in western Europe.

An exception may be made for individuals particularly at risk in the former Yugoslavia -- but not necessarily their families. Some member states have been implementing this policy on a bilateral basis for several months now. In September Germany reached an agreement with Romania last September to take back thousands of Romanian gypsies who have often been subjects of racist attacks in Germany and Romania.

Overall, the Community has admitted 500,000 refugees fleeing the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

As the meeting in Copenhagen was taking place, the UNHCR representative for the Benelux and EC institutions, Ruprecht von Arnim, expressed fears about the fate of future refugees seeking to enter the Community. "We would like to see this meeting coming out with the most liberal policy possible, on humanitarian grounds, especially regarding the reunion of families," von Arnim said. "We hope they take into account our requests for a view of solidarity and liberalism regarding refugees."

But the EC ministers apparently paid little attention to requests either from the UNHCR or from human rights groups such as Amnesty International. The ministers moved to strengthen visa requirements for refugees from the former Yugoslavia and also made conclusions to a draft resolution on common standards for admission of certain groups who might be at risk in the continuing warfare in Bosnia-Herzegovina and other republics.

While declining to comment on the new EC

immigration rules, Amnesty International has repeatedly raised its concerns about the Community's emerging asylum policy.

However they said they thought it "inappropriate" for EC governments to set their own rules on asylum matters "without proper and meaningful reference to established intergovernmental forums," such as the Executive Committee of the UNHCR.

In a open letter published last Wednesday, the group condemned the EC resolution, adopted in November, on sending asylum seekers back to "safe" countries that they have passed through before entering EC territory. "These resolutions, if implemented, will have the effect of 'dumping' asylum-seekers in Eastern and Central Europe," Amnesty said. The organisation also criticised the EC's intention to speed up the deportation of people making what Community officials call "manifestly unfounded" claims for asylum.

"The EC must undertake effective measures to build protection for refugees in the wider Europe, and in particular should work to develop an international agreement, binding on all European states, on minimum procedural standards for dealing with asylum claims."

On Wednesday EC ministers are scheduled to hold talks with officials of the United States, Canada, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Switzerland and Morocco, on strengthening international police cooperation.

UNHCR CRITICISES "SAFE" COUNTRY POLICY

by Senthil Ratnasabapathy

VIENNA, Jun 1 (IPS) - European policies that seek to divert refugees away from western Europe and into countries or regions considered 'safe' were again criticised Tuesday by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

European Community officials met in Copenhagen Tuesday to confirm their existing policy of returning refugees to 'safe' countries or regions they passed through to escape war, famine or threat of torture -- rather than allow them to stay in the west.

The policy, for example could mean refugees from Yugoslavia who escaped via Hungary to Austria, may be refused asylum in Austria, returned to Hungary -- and if not accepted there, sent to an area of Yugoslavia considered 'safe' by EC or Hungarian standards.

The policy of returning asylum seekers to their first safe point of refuge has been so far "disadvantageous from the standpoint of legal

(continued on page 4)

2 June 1993

IPS Daily Journal

Vol. I No. 67, page 4

protection for refugees," Steffan Bodemar, the UNHCR representative in Vienna said Tuesday. Bodemar said the authorities often make only a the most superficial assessment of the safeness of 'safe' countries and that merely being a signatory to the Geneva Convention on Refugees may suffice -- regardless of their actual human rights records.

Last Wednesday, the German parliament bowed to public pressure by paving the way for a new asylum law -- with a 'safe third country' passage -- which critics say will make it more difficult for the persecuted to enter the country. Under Austrian refugee law, those who enter the country through a third country and not directly from their country of origin can be refused asylum.

Since the asylum law came into effect last June the number of applications have dropped drastically. During the first quarter of this year, there were a mere 1,200 applications as compared with 6,000 the same quarter last year, according to government figures.

Home ministry officials claim the new law makes it easier for political refugees to receive asylum, but refugee activists claim officialdom's obsession with 'illegal immigrants' denies applicants a fair hearing.

Bodemar says Austrian refugee policy places more importance on checking whether the asylum seeker fails to meet their conditions rather than considering the merits of the asylum application

case by case. "Only when there is no exclusion possible are the reasons for seeking asylum checked," he said.

The Austrian Aliens Police, charged with the responsibility of deciding whether the asylum seeker should be expelled or not, often try to send the refugee back not to the 'safe third country' but to his or her country of origin, said Bodemar.

The UNHCR representative accepted the right of countries to fight the misuse of asylum procedures, and supported faster asylum procedures -- with legal guarantees -- designed to detect misuse. But he warned against the dumping of refugees by rich western European countries into poorer east and central European nations that are geographically nearer the crisis countries.

East European countries repeatedly complain that most of the refugees pass through their territories before entering into the West and thus would have to accept them if deported by the West. Germany recently concluded an agreement with Poland whereby the latter would receive financial help to bear the cost of looking after refugees who are to be deported by Bonn.

Apart from a programme to share the burden on an international level, the U.N. representative also called for economic development and the improvement of the human rights in countries from where refugees originate. ■

WARREN CHRISTOPHER TO ADDRESS HUMAN RIGHTS CONFERENCE IN VIENNA

(continued from front cover)

Urging ratification of the treaties, one of which is the U.N. Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, could enhance U.S. influence at the Jun. 13-25 Vienna conference, they said.

One official declared that "Third World countries should appreciate our recognition of economic and social rights". The official noted that many developing nations, especially in Asia, have argued that Western notions of political and civil rights have been given too much stress at human rights meetings.

Michael Posner, Director of the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR), said Christopher's decision to address the Vienna meeting "sends a signal to the rest of the world that the United States is taking the conference seriously and that it regards human rights as a high priority".

Christopher, however, will be in Vienna for only one day. The rest of the time, the U.S. delegation will be led by Under-Secretary of State for Global Issues, Tim Wirth. The U.S. delegation has been slow in developing the position it will bring to the conference. Last month, however, it circulated a draft "human

rights action plan" which called for the creation of a U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights as a top priority in Vienna.

If approved, the Commissioner would be given wide authority to make the U.N. system responsive to human rights concerns or to bring to the attention of the U.N. Security Council human rights abuses which threaten international peace and security. But the U.S. delegation has remained silent on another key proposal made by U.S. non-governmental organisations (NGOS) -- to create a permanent international court under the United Nations which would try human rights cases brought by individuals against governments.

Conventions on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and on the Elimination of All Forms of Racism are among the four human rights treaties the Clinton administration is expected to endorse as early as Wednesday.

They also include the Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man. Carter, who has been invited to address a meeting of up to 2,000 NGOs in Vienna prior to the World Conference, signed all four covenants in the late 1970s, but they were shelved when the Senate vowed to block their approval.

Clinton could face similar problems with

(continued on page 5)

2 June 1993

IPS Daily Journal

Vol. 1 No. 67, page 5

due, while Washington responded that civil and political rights should always be given primacy over economic and social rights. Carter tried to end this argument by signing the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, but his successor, Ronald Reagan, said Washington would not recognise the Covenant.

Since the end of the Cold War, some Asian governments who have been attacked by Washington and other Western governments on their adherence to civil and political rights, have also argued that economic and social rights should come first. They

are expected to press this case at Vienna.

But Clinton's decision to embrace economic and social rights may undermine their position, according to O'Dea and Posner. "The administration's decision to press forward on the Covenant underscores the universality of the human rights treaties as a standard," Posner said.

"For the United States to say we also care about economic and social rights -- and that all rights are indivisible -- begins to clarify the universality that has to be felt East and West, North and South," he added. ■

RICH, POOR WRANGLE OVER DESERTIFICATION PACT

by Horace Awori

NAIROBI, May 31 (IPSi) - The rich North and poor South are once again pitted against each other over a proposed environmental pact to combat desertification.

The rift between the industrialised and mainly African nations emerged at the May 24 to Jun. 3 meeting of the U.N.'s Inter-governmental Negotiating Committee on Desertification (INDCD) being held in the Kenyan capital.

Midway through the talks, Western countries expressed their opposition to an African suggestion that the Global Environment Facility (GEF) -- the key conduit for new environmental funding -- should be used for paying for anti-desertification projects.

Desertification and drought, which affects one-sixth of the world's population, was a key issue for Africa at last June's Earth Summit in Brazil.

Western countries had argued that desertification was not a global problem and therefore not the responsibility of the GEF.

But agreement on the inclusion of desertification within GEF appeared to have been reached at a meeting in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire in December. "It is a mockery", said one non-governmental organisation (NGO) delegate, who did want to be identified. "The North is looking for excuses not to commit new money. The South, especially Africa, is desperately trying to solve its debt problem".

Another NGO representative from India observed: "If the convention can take even one major step to remove the global causes of desertification and focus on strengthening local communities, it would be a major achievement".

A delegate from one of the European countries believes lifestyles of the rich in the North would be affected by the proposed desertification pact. "How do I convince my voters that they should change their lifestyles to prevent desertification, since they do not even feel the impact?" she argues.

However, environmental NGOs feel that it is important to focus on the global benefits of an improved environment to convince everybody of their responsibilities.

"We have to highlight the global benefits of halting desertification and land degradation and change our mind-sets", says Michel Faucon, a French NGO spokesperson.

An African diplomat in the United States who is here for the meeting stresses that, "what's really at stake is money".

"Northern governments privately express their inability to dish out any new funds in addition to the present shrinking aid budget. But nobody is willing to publicly state this position", says the diplomat who spoke to IPS on condition of anonymity.

This, he noted, "creates a false hope among African governments". "African governments are not looking for alms", said the Malian delegate briefing NGOs here. "We want a global agreement to deal with desertification in the same spirit as we agreed to sign the Montreal protocol and the climate change convention, though we had little to do with those problems" ■

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IPS, United Nations, Room 485, New York, N.Y. 10017
Tel.(212)963-6156/751-3255, Fax (212)754-2791/888-6099