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ASIAN RURAL WOMEN SPEAK OUT: Rights, Empowerment and Liberation!

The inequities based on gender are rooted in the organized oppression through caste, race, and ethnicity. Rural women in Asia continue to face oppression and violence in all forms – from the impact of globalization, corporatization of agriculture, lack of ownership or access to land and resources, fundamentalism, militarization, and state violence to patriarchy.

Recognizing that the conditions of rural women are intricately linked with international and national contexts, 716 women from 21 countries representing peasants, agricultural workers, indigenous women, Dalit women, nomads, fisherfolk, informal and formal workers and migrants, and supportive activists met and discussed the situation and strategies for change during the 1st Asian Rural Women's Conference from March 6-8, 2008 in Arakkonam, Tamil Nadu, India.

The Conference was jointly organized by the following organizations working on women and rural development: Tamil Nadu Women's Forum (TNWF), Society for Rural Education and Development (SRED), TENAGANITA, Human Development Organization (HDO), GABRIELA, International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR), All Nepal Women's Alliance (ANWA), Committee for Asian Women (CAW), Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW), Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP), and CARAM-Asia.

Intensifying poverty, oppression and exploitation

The present imperialist-dominated economic and political processes promote corporate control over all aspects of food and fiber production and have created monopoly control over land, seas and marine resources, water, livelihoods, seeds and

genetic biodiversity. Corporate farming and contract farming, intensive industrial aquaculture, expansion of agro-fuel projects, setting up of special economic zones (SEZs), and massive land conversion are displacing thousands of women peasants, agricultural workers and fisherfolk, worsening the loss of livelihoods and productive resources, increasingly poisoning the environment, accelerating poverty and disintegrating the rural economy. Rural women are disproportionately and negatively affected, suffering increased gender-based violence, hunger and malnutrition, forced evictions and trafficking.

Industries like mining, logging, energy projects, bio-fuel production and agro-industries are taking away the ancestral lands of indigenous women and their communities. Commercialization and monopoly control are destroying traditional knowledge and practices that have kept indigenous women self-



PHOTO: TETI LAURON

sufficient. Displaced from their economic base, indigenous women are forced to migrate and lose the protection provided by their communities, and alienate themselves from their culture and value systems. It is in this way that imperialist globalization is causing ethnocide among indigenous women, their children and their communities.

Life and livelihood of the small-scale fisherfolk have been destroyed by liberalized policies of globalization processes, privatization of the sea and marine resources and the push for exports that have increased the use of modern fishing techniques including trawler fishing and push nets, thus decreasing fish production. At the same time, mega-projects, SEZs, tourism and intensive industrial aquaculture are decreasing the access of women fisherfolk to the sea and marine resources.

Neoliberal globalization processes have caused the greatest destruction of formal and regular work worldwide. The strategy of flexibilization of labor has pushed more women workers into informal work where they are not covered by labor laws and are therefore subject to greater exploitation and abuse.

Rural women are forced to cross borders due to state repression, and in search of livelihood have had to bear huge social costs: are subjected to increased violence, abuse, exploitation, discrimination and criminalization, denied their rights as women and as migrant workers, and when they return home, face alienation.

Rising religious fundamentalisms have made rural women more invisible, further restricted women's decision-making and mobility, legitimated violence on rural women, revived religious-sanctioned prostitution, perpetuated discrimination, and denied women's inherent right to control their lives, their sexuality and resources.

Dalit women are further denied of their rights to land, political and equal status, and the very right to life with the intersection

of caste discrimination with fundamentalisms and neoliberal globalization. Dalit women face increased untouchability, sexual exploitation and the violent atrocities and harassment by the dominant caste.

The US-led global "War on Terror" being used to push globalization policies, and the economic interests of US and other big capitalist countries are providing Asian governments with the rationale to increase militarization and state terrorism, and is fanning ethnic conflicts in Asia. This has led to killings, detention and harassment of more rural women. In the guise of security, repressive governments like those in Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Philippines are carrying out extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances of women, men and children. Ethnic conflicts and civil wars are causing forced displacement of thousands of people, and caste riots are resulting in massive violence against Dalit women. Women in conflict areas are raped as a tool of war, killed, forced to "service" the armed forces, and, in extreme circumstances, become victims of genocide.

Within the context of the "War on Terror", the top nuclear powers continue nuclear explosions testing. Radiation is the most horrible yet invisible weapon of war. It can kill the environment and lead to the annihilation of mankind. It primarily affects women of fertile age and their children. It causes cancer, particularly of the uterus, breast and blood. Women are suffering and dying from exposure to radiation.

Reclaiming women's rights through resistance

Acknowledging that the struggle of women is the struggle for rights,

identity, dignity, empowerment and full potentiality, the Conference was a huge shout out for rural women to defy injustices and raise their voices against all forms of discrimination and violence on women.

Rural women have become involved in different forms of struggle as they carry their fight in their farms, picket lines, street demonstrations, parliaments and urban centers. Women are holding up placards and are in the frontline, from protesting the US-led "War on Terror", right up to human rights struggles and the fight for freedom and justice in their own lands and workplace. Rural women are resisting corporate-dominated mal-development and trade liberalization. All over Asia, women peasants, farmers and workers are organizing to drive out transnational corporations such as Syngenta and Monsanto. Rural women are demanding food sovereignty. Women farmers are out in the fields practicing sustainable agriculture and livelihoods. Rural women are fighting to take control of their bodies and claim their reproductive rights. Rural women are challenging patriarchy within their families and communities. Rural women are challenging national policies to incorporate the women's agenda and become represented in parliaments.

The Conference participants also resolved to continue to challenge and resist neo-liberal globalization, imperialist and fundamentalist forces and militarization. And to achieve this objective, the Asian Rural Women's Coalition (ARWC) was founded as the expression of solidarity with democratic movements all over Asia.

(Based on documents from the Asian Rural Conference held from March 6-8, 2008 in Arakkonam, Tamil, Nadu, India.)

RP, ASEAN nations now powerless to protect own economy with Japan-ASEAN trade pact

A recently-signed free trade agreement between Japan and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) would grant Japanese corporations unhampered access to the region's markets, prohibiting ASEAN members to protect their own economy while allowing Japan to protect its domestic advantages.

According to IBON research head Sonny Africa, the signing of the Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Partnership among ASEAN members and Japan (AJCEP) is another step toward Japan's plan for an overarching economic partnership agreement with the countries of East Asia. The agreement would allow

Japanese corporations to take advantage of ASEAN markets, labor and natural resources.

"The Japan-ASEAN trade pact is part of Japan's campaign to cement its economic power across the region," said Africa.

He noted that Chapter 2, Article 15 of the AJCEP calls for each party to the agreement to accord "national treatment" to the goods of the other parties in accordance with Article III of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). This means that ASEAN countries must treat imported products from Japan the same as their locally-made products.

He warned that this provision prevents the Philippines and other

developing ASEAN countries from using trade barriers, such as tariffs, as policy tools for economic development. Like the experience of countries who liberalized prematurely, the pact could stifle the growth of many domestic industries in ASEAN nations as they are overwhelmed by a flood of cheap imports from Japan.

Under this unfair deal, ASEAN countries will be prevented from using the same protectionist policies that Japan itself used early in its economic development and may find themselves ultimately reduced to being sources of cheap labor and mineral and agricultural resources. **IBON Foundation, Inc.**

Gov't can ensure cheaper rice by doing away with liberalization, resisting creditor pressure

Government can actually provide the much-needed relief of low-priced rice if it only gets out of its liberalization framework in coming out with remedies to the current rice crisis, said independent think-tank IBON Foundation.

Its responses to the rice crisis such as lifting the rice import quota and the proposal to increase the selling price of National Food Authority (NFA) rice are all conditionalities imposed on government by multilateral creditors like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for further liberalization.

The Arroyo administration could, for instance, increase NFA procurement to help local rice producers, but it clearly prefers to preserve its "fiscal gains" by denying the agency enough subsidy, said IBON research head Sonny Africa.

Rice imports needed to make up for shortfalls in local production could mean as much as a P64.1-billion subsidy for NFA rice this year, an amount that is already over five times the national government deficit in 2007.

Providing this much subsidy – even if it will benefit farmers and consumers – would not

sit well with creditors. Hence, instead of strengthening the NFA, government has removed rice import quota to allow private traders to import larger amounts of rice, and now proposes for a hike in NFA prices.

These recent government proposals, Africa said, all comply with the ADB and World Bank conditionalities of NFA privatization and full liberalization of rice importation. It clearly shows that while it can ensure cheaper rice, government chooses to abandon its responsibility to the people and give in to creditor pressure. **IBON Foundation, Inc.**

WOMEN PUSH for POLITICAL SPACE in PATRIARCHY

Ashfaq Yusufzai

PESHAWAR, Mar 7 (IPS) - Saeeda Anwar is a 38-year-old Pakistani schoolteacher. She works in a school here in the capital of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), but she is not allowed to exercise her franchise.

“My family is strictly against women voting. They don’t like us to vote. Although, I am allowed to work as a teacher because I give them all my salary,” she says of the male members of her family.

Patriarchy is deeply embedded in the NWFP. The Pakistan government has neither been able to implement modernizing programs nor Article 34 of the Pakistan Constitution (1973) that says ‘steps shall be taken to ensure full participation of women in all spheres of national life’.

Here women are banned from participation and decision-making – a tribal feudalism almost as rigid as in adjacent Afghanistan under the Taliban. It is the men who decide who their women can talk to or whether they can go out of the house, also who their daughters should marry and when.

Yet, 15 women challenged political exclusion and contested the Feb. 18 polls to parliament and the

PHOTO: ASHFAQYUSUFZAI/IPS



national assembly from the NWFP. Not one won, and polling by women, both in the province and in the neighboring Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), was once again the lowest in Pakistan.

Dr Simin Mehmud Jan, the Pakistan Muslim League's (PML-Q) candidate for the assembly election from Peshawar city, blamed her defeat on "Pukhtunwali" (the code of Pakhtuns or Pashtuns who are the majority in northern Pakistan). "The NWFP and FATA are ingrained with Pukhtunwali, and not yet ready to accept a woman as their political representative," she told IPS.

But she was not about to give up hope. People will start accepting women as their political representatives by the time of the next general election, she said very optimistically, in an interview. A medical professional, she was a former member of the provincial assembly, nominated by her then ruling party.

The first woman elected to the National Assembly, Pakistan's parliament, was Begum Nasim Wali Khan, wife of the late Awami National Party (ANP) leader, Khan Abdul Wali Khan, in 1977. She was elected an unprecedented four times.

Women won 15 of the 272 seats where direct elections were held last month, improving upon their tally of 13 in the last 2002 general election. There are 342 seats in parliament, but the Pakistani constitution reserves 10 seats for religious minorities and 60 seats for women, to be filled by proportional representation among parties with more than five percent of the vote.

"I am less known as compared to other candidates (male), perhaps

Ghaliba Khusheed believes her crushing defeat was the result of "negative propaganda about women's participation by male rivals".

that is the reason I lost," says Shazia Asif Baghi. "But I have not lost heart and will contest again." Baghi had hoped to win the votes of women, but very few made it to polling booths.

Ghaliba Khusheed, a former member of the provincial assembly who contested as an independent candidate from two constituencies in Peshawar, believes her crushing defeat was the result of "negative propaganda about women's participation by male rivals".

"The major reason for this nondemocratic behavior is gender disparity due to tribal culture," comments Rakhshanda Naz, resident director of the Aurat Foundation, part of a civil society Alliance for Protection of Human Rights (APHR), which campaigned widely for the voting rights of women in the run-up to the polls.

"The reason for the dismal electoral performance may be many," observes Rabia Begum, a political scientist at the University of Peshawar. "That no woman won reveals the extent to which our society is conservative," she told IPS.

The alliance of civil society organizations has called

for an investigation into the disenfranchisement of women. Women comprise 47 percent of the population of NWFP and FATA.

"We demand from the new government that they probe how women were disallowed from voting in Peshawar, Malakand, Dera Ismail Khan, Dir Lower, Swabi, Shangla, Kohistan, Batagram and Charsadda districts and in the tribal areas," said Aurat Foundation's Naz speaking on behalf of the eight-member APHR.

Zahira Khattak, president of the ANP's women's wing, and Bushra Gohar, nominated to parliament by the ANP, said their party, which won the provincial elections edging out the ruling religious right coalition, would work towards bringing more women to the polling booth in the next election. In the 2002 polls, hardline candidates had signed an agreement to prevent women from voting.

The left-leaning ANP is poised to form the government in the NWFP with the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto, the assassinated former prime minister.

Meanwhile, Shazia Aurangzeb, the provincial secretary-general of ex-premier Nawaz Sharif's party, Pakistan Muslim League, said empowerment of women was their one-point agenda.

"My party has very ambitious plans for women. We will introduce micro-credit schemes for poor women. Once they get empowered they will learn that voting is their right," she told IPS. Women are back center-stage in the politics of Pakistan's patriarchal north. **IPS Inter Press Service**

AFRICA:

Millions of children *falling* through the cracks

Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 21 (IPS) - A significant proportion of the world's 2.2 billion children, many of whom are victims of violence, sexual abuse, labor exploitation and preventable diseases, are from the crisis-plagued African continent.

As the United Nations points out, too many of the world's children, largely African, have been "bought and sold, exploited and abused, harmed and orphaned."

Of the 11 countries where 20 percent or more of children die before the age of five, 10 are in Africa: Angola, Burkina Faso, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger and Sierra Leone. The only non-African country on that list is Afghanistan.



PHOTO: JULIEN HARNES/FILKIR.COM

"The conditions in many African countries, especially for children, are very grave," Dr Mustafa Ali, the Kenya-based secretary-general of the African Council of Religious Leaders, told IPS.

After a recent tour of several African countries, including Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire, he lamented the fact that "in some countries, it is worsening every day".

The number of children living with HIV/AIDS increased from 1.5 million in 2001 to 2.5 million in 2007. And nearly 90 percent of all HIV-positive children are in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the United Nations.

Ali said that "increasing poverty has conspired with unrelenting preventable HIV/AIDS, as well as treatable malaria scourges, to destroy most what was left of the social structures that would traditionally take care of children."

"It is primarily because of poverty that these children would rather go and be enslaved to get food, while others find themselves trafficked – some against their will – for promises of a better life," said Dr Ali, who is also the coordinator in Africa for the Tokyo-based Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC).

The UN children's agency UNICEF recently warned that about 90,000 children in battle-scarred Somalia could die without immediate supplementary nutrition and therapeutic feeding.

UNICEF's Christian Balslev-Olesen says: "If we cannot maintain the activities that we have been running up to now, you will see a crisis."

The UN agency, which has appealed for 10 million dollars for its nutritional, water and sanitation programmes, has warned it may be forced to close down some of its centres in Somalia if adequate funding is not received.

PHOTO: MICHAEL KAMBERY/Flickr.com



As the fighting continues in Somalia, the UN Security Council is discussing a proposal for the creation of a new peacekeeping force for that country.

Radhika Coomaraswamy, the UN Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, says that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) alone, thousands of children are victims of forced military conscription and sexual violence.

She says the positive news coming out of Africa is that with the conclusion of the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the number of child soldiers may have gone down: from about 300,000 to about 250,000.

But according to UN estimates, there is still an unacceptable number of children under military conscription -- mostly forced conscription and primarily in Africa.

Asked to what extent African nations themselves could be blamed for the current situation, Ali said that "most leaders and bureaucrats in Africa are responsible for the mess children are in today. They must take responsibility for this."

He said there are others who have directly caused untold suffering to children, and conscripted children to savagery, turning them into war machines.

"They must never be allowed to ever walk free again," he said. "I just came back from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire where I saw firsthand what the conflict has done to children in these countries."

Charles Taylor (the former president of Liberia, now on trial before the International Criminal Court in the Hague), and all the other warlords, including some who are still ministers and parliamentarians in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, must be held fully accountable for their crimes against children and against humanity, Ali added.

He also stressed that "morally and ethically speaking, countries of the West must stop selling arms to the African countries".

"There can be no justification whatsoever for selling arms to African countries whose population

is starving and cannot afford to care for its children," he added.

Asked what role religion and ethics education can play in focusing on the plight of African children, and particularly the Global Network of Religions for Children, he said the GNRC's unique multi-faith approach will go a long way "in educating ourselves on the need to change our own environment and that of the others – for the better."

He said it is in line with the cherished African traditional philosophy of "ubuntu" – meaning that "we must take care of each other for all of us to be secure." The massive spiritual, moral and social assets of religions can firmly ensure that most of the problems affecting children can be solved if people just work together, he argued.

Asked if the United Nations and the international community are doing enough to help African children, he said: "The UN, its agencies and the international community have done extremely very little to alleviate the suffering of these children."

"There is too much waste and bureaucratic processes," Ali charged. "In Africa, you no longer need to hold poverty and development workshops, waste money on expensive researches and inquiries on the levels of poverty." Instead, he said that these funds could be redirected to save African lives, one of which is lost every three seconds because of a preventable or treatable cause. **IPS Inter Press Service**

Malaysia and the US have been negotiating a free trade agreement since 2006. The talks ran into some obstacles in the last round which may make it difficult to conclude. In the article below, Martin Khor raises some of the concerns expressed by local economic groupings and civil society on some of the issues in the proposed agreement and their implications for Malaysia.

MALAYSIA: Rocky road to an FTA

Martin Khor
Third World Network (TWN)

Almost all families have one or more members that have or develop a serious ailment, be it heart disease, hypertension, cancer, asthma, Parkinson's Disease, HIV/AIDS and so on. And each patient needs medicines. Prices are often high and make a big dent in the household budget. If the cost is too much, the family looks on miserably as the patient endures sickness without the full treatment he or she deserves.

This is the background to the growing debate on one aspect of some Free Trade Agreements (FTAs).

Malaysia has entered into negotiations on an FTA with the United States since 2006 and based on US demands in its other free-trade agreements, patents will last longer and US pharmaceutical companies will get new monopolies even when there is no patent. This will have profound impacts on generic medicine producers and thus access to affordable medicines.

As such Malaysia's generic drug companies have expressed their grave concerns that the FTA that Malaysia is negotiating with the US will hinder or even kill their operations.

Generic medicines are cheaper than the branded ones. If there are no or fewer generic drugs, patients have to pay more – maybe 10 times more in some cases.

"Patented medicines in Malaysia can be 1,044% more expensive than their generic equivalents, so extensions of (patent) monopolies under MUFTA (the Malaysian-US FTA) will condemn Malaysians to paying higher prices for longer," said Jimmy Piong, vice-president of Malaysian Organisation of Pharmaceutical Industries, in a letter in the Malaysian daily New Straits Times on 28 February, 2007. There will also be serious restrictions on Malaysia's ability to issue compulsory licences the way it successfully did in 2003, said the group.

In that measure, the import of some HIV/AIDS generic drugs from India cuts costs to one-seventh, and the Malaysia's health ministry could treat many more patients.

It was a pioneering move that other countries (like Indonesia and Thailand) were to follow, Piong also revealed that "one of Malaysia's largest generic manufacturers has announced it will set up its manufacturing operations in India because once the

FTA takes effect, it would stand to lose to US-based multinational pharmaceutical companies.”

The organization’s worries and warnings are well founded. Almost all patents registered in Malaysia are foreign owned, so the tightening of patent laws due to MUFTA will benefit the foreign companies, at the expense of local companies and consumers.

Both the government and private patients have to shell out more money as drug prices soar. For example, South Korea will pay US\$757 million more a year if drug patents are extended by four years due to an FTA with the US, according to the Korean National Health Insurance Corporation.

The South Korean health minister also warned that under a free trade deal, the damage to South Korea’s drug industry might be between US\$629 million to US\$1 billion (RM3.5 billion).

Colombia’s generic drug industry may lose 71% of its local market share due to the country’s FTA with the US, according to an estimate from the World Health Organization’s Model.

One extreme proposal of the FTA is for “data exclusivity”, that data submitted by an originator company to get safety approval from the health authorities for its drug cannot be used as the basis to also approve the safety application for generic versions

of the same drug. This use of the data is presently common practice.

The US demand in other FTAs is that this “data exclusivity” applies (for at least five years) even to non-patented drugs. Most locally produced or imported generic medicines are versions of non-patented drugs.

With this “data exclusivity”, generic drugs can’t get safety approval and won’t be marketed. There is thus a danger that the cheaper drugs will not be available, and patients have to pay more for branded products.

Besides medicines, there are other serious issues thrown up by the FTA. Farmers will be challenged by possible zero tariffs

under accelerated liberalization of services.

The government’s procurement business, worth RM100 billion, which is mainly reserved for locals will be thrown open to American companies, if the US demands are agreed to.

And the many regulations restricting the maximum foreign ownership share of many sectors are also being challenged.

Many national policies and practices are thus being subject to such strong pressures and challenges under an FTA. The question naturally arises, is it worth paying such a high cost, and for what benefits?

Moreover, once the concessions are made for one country, it is a matter of time before the same has to be given to other countries that also seek FTAs.

Due to these many problems, many FTA negotiations do not conclude. Countries start with hopes of many benefits and then decide to suspend or

stop the talks when they realize there are too many problems.

Those who have stopped or suspended their FTA talks with the US include Switzerland, Thailand, Southern African countries, and the Free Trade Area for the Americas (involving the US and the South American and Caribbean regions).—**Third World Network Features**

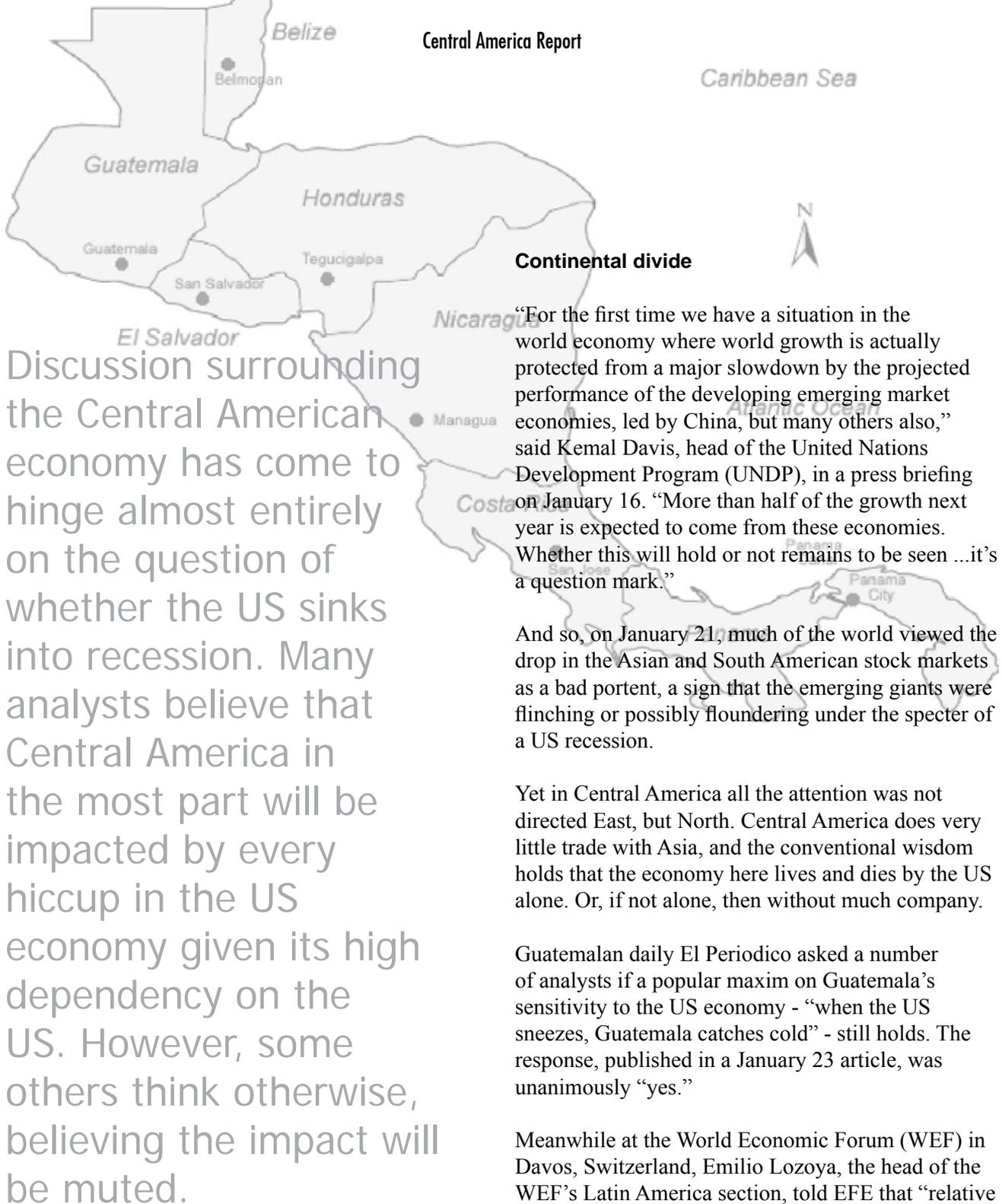


and competition from subsidized (thus artificially cheapened) American farm products, as well as a possible ban on their ability to save and exchange seeds that are subject to intellectual property.

Local banks, retail shops, telecom and broadcast companies, professionals (lawyers, doctors, architects, engineers) and others may face stiffer competition

CENTRAL AMERICA

in the face of US recession fears



Discussion surrounding the Central American economy has come to hinge almost entirely on the question of whether the US sinks into recession. Many analysts believe that Central America in the most part will be impacted by every hiccup in the US economy given its high dependency on the US. However, some others think otherwise, believing the impact will be muted.

“For the first time we have a situation in the world economy where world growth is actually protected from a major slowdown by the projected performance of the developing emerging market economies, led by China, but many others also,” said Kemal Davis, head of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), in a press briefing on January 16. “More than half of the growth next year is expected to come from these economies. Whether this will hold or not remains to be seen ...it’s a question mark.”

And so, on January 21, much of the world viewed the drop in the Asian and South American stock markets as a bad portent, a sign that the emerging giants were flinching or possibly floundering under the specter of a US recession.

Yet in Central America all the attention was not directed East, but North. Central America does very little trade with Asia, and the conventional wisdom holds that the economy here lives and dies by the US alone. Or, if not alone, then without much company.

Guatemalan daily El Periodico asked a number of analysts if a popular maxim on Guatemala’s sensitivity to the US economy - “when the US sneezes, Guatemala catches cold” - still holds. The response, published in a January 23 article, was unanimously “yes.”

Meanwhile at the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, Emilio Lozoya, the head of the WEF’s Latin America section, told EFE that “relative

to GDP, Mexico and Central America export significantly to the US, making them more vulnerable to tumults in the US economy. Economies in South America are more diversified and therefore more protected.”

For the most part, prognostications for the Latin American economic situation in 2008 have fixed into a pattern. Facing possible economic doom in the US, Latin America will fare better than in past years, many analysts say, with the qualification that Central America and Mexico may not.

“Latin America is in a far better position than it has been in the past. The good news is that there is good news in Latin America,” said Pamela Cox, the World Bank’s vice-president for Latin America and the Caribbean, on November 27. She clarified, however, that there was an exception: “those countries that have strong trade ties with the US and that receive a large amount of remittances from the U.S.”

Dependence up for debate

Not all analysts, however, are equally convinced that Central America continues to be exclusively dependent on the US. Edgar Balsells, the Guatemalan Congress’ representative on the Monetary Board, is a skeptic.

“There has been no movement in the Guatemalan economy,” he told CAR, “and it is not yet known if there will be.”

A recession in the US, he said, will not necessarily hurt Guatemala and might even help it. Why? As investment possibilities dry up in



PHOTO: JONATHAN PIO/Flickr.com

the US, Guatemalan capitalists will return to Guatemala. This, according to Balsells, is why Guatemala’s GDP grew in 1911, even as the US sunk into recession.

“You have to watch what the Guatemalan capitalists do,” he said.

He added that Guatemala has been importing a great deal of cheap Chinese imports, which helps to counter-act rising fuel and food prices.

A month ago, the World Bank’s second in command and managing director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Juan Jose Daboub, told Salvadoran daily La Prensa Grafica that Central America should not be too worried about a US recession. Daboub, who is from El Salvador, commented that in a globalized world, Latin America, but also Central America and “particularly El Salvador,” are less susceptible than they used to be to the vagaries of the US economy.

“If the US economy decelerates, obviously there will be an impact on our economies,” he said. “Nevertheless, this impact will be significantly less than it would have been ten or fifteen years ago, when the economies were less diversified, with fewer international reserves and with more debt in other currencies.”

He was also sanguine about employment for Salvadorans living in the US. He claimed that “our compatriots are in sectors of the economy that, if the US economy decelerates, can easily move to other sectors. For this reason, the impact won’t be as negative.”

To the South, Nicaraguan sociologist and economist Cirilo Otero told the daily Nuevo Diario that although “Nicaraguan businessmen say that exports and remittances will drop, this shouldn’t be cause for alarm.”

He explained that Nicaragua enjoys a certain “advantage” in

that Nicaragua's economy is not tied to international as much as national trade (El Nuevo Diario, January 18, 2007).

Others are more confident in Central America's economic outlook, if only because they do not anticipate a recession in the US. A study released this week by Fitch Rating service, found that Latin American businessmen do not believe there will be a recession. According to the study, they are confident that US growth will be between 1% and 2%.

But most analysts are pessimistic. Miguel Gutierrez, an analyst for Central American Business intelligence, told CAR that a US recession is "imminent" and that the isthmus will begin to feel its effects in the second semester of 2008 and into 2009 and 2010.

Hugo Maul told CAR that although Guatemala has made progress in insuring itself from a US economic slide, particularly by increasing its international reserves, a US recession will still be troublesome for Guatemala.

(But, at the least, Gutierrez and Maul said that reported financial losses for North American banks will not affect their Central American subsidiaries, as they are run independently of each other.)

Nicaraguan economist Nestor Avedano told El Nuevo Diario that, contrary to Cirilo Otero's claims, a fall in exports and remittances will have significantly negative effects on Nicaragua's economy.

Employment woes

Central American countries have barely diversified their exports since the mid-1990s. It is obvious that the Central American export sector is still highly reliant on the

US, but how much a recession reduces US consumer demand remains to be seen.

The evidence is clearer, though, that the era of extravagant remittance growth is coming to an end.

What the Guatemalan government should do: two views

Regardless of whether remittances fall or rise, Edgar Balsells told CAR that they are a poor substitute for development.

"How many years can Guatemala continue to live on remittances?" He asked. "I doubt that in ten or twenty years we will be as reliant on them."

He said the best way the government can stimulate economic growth is if the government adopts a "long term vision" that focuses on industrialization.

In contrast, Hugo Maul, who thinks that a recession in the US will be bad for Guatemala, thinks there is little the government can do.

"Public resources are tied up in bureaucracy, and raising taxes would strangle economic growth," he said, "so, unlike developed economies, the government can't invest in big infrastructure or employment projects to stimulate growth."

Rather than raise spending, Maul argued, the government should limit it and avoid further indebting itself. And whereas the US Federal Reserve is slashing interest rates to galvanize growth, the Guatemalan monetary board should raise rates, according to Maul.

"Cheap, easy credit has created a boom in consumer goods and contributed to inflation," he said. "And so the government should raise rates."

Balsells, though, said raising interest rates would benefit banks at the expense of small and medium sized businesses.

"Economists look to the US as a model, but don't consider that the Guatemalan economy has a different dynamic," he said.

Nonetheless, there was one point of agreement between them: that the Guatemalan government must do more to regulate the banking industry.

"The banking culture here has imported the Wall Street mindset that 'regulation is bad,'" Balsells said. "The government needs to undo that."

Juan Jose Daboub's comments on emigrant workers in the US - that they can easily glide from sector to sector - if ever true, were soon belied by the release of the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) employment report for December 2007. According to the report's household survey, in December alone the unemployment rate rose 0.3 points to 5%. Meanwhile, the economy lost 13,000 non-governmental jobs, according to the BLS's payroll report. Over the course of the year, unemployment rose by 0.6 points, and the economy added only 1.3 million jobs, one million less than in 2006.

Explaining the results, Jared Bernstein, an analyst for the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), wrote on EPI's website that "while the jobless rate remains relatively low, at 5%, an uptick of this magnitude (up 0.3% in one month) has historically been either a symptom or a harbinger of recession."

He added that "one month of particularly weak jobs data does not necessarily signal a new, negative trend (but) a broad set of indicators throughout (the report) suggest the weakening economy has finally reached the job market."

If the trend continues, migrants will struggle to find new jobs as their old ones disappear. Construction, the US industry that employs the most Central Americans, is the US industry contracting the fastest, a casualty of the collapsed housing market. The BLS report reveals that all other industries are lagging or shrinking.

The industries that employ Central American and Mexican migrants, according to the International InterAmerican Bank (IDB), are: construction (28% of migrants), domestic services (22%), hospitality services (21%), agriculture and textile manufacturing (10%), and administration and professional services (8%). The unemployed (8%) and students and housewives (3%) make up the rest.

The construction industry lost 49,000 jobs in December, bringing it to 236,000 construction jobs lost since an industry peak in September 2006. In the domestic service sector, the economy added only 10,000 jobs in 2007. Meanwhile, the textile industry lost 46,900 jobs and agriculture lost 1,000.

The service sector did continue to add jobs, albeit at a diminished rate. The hospitality sector added some 352,000 in 2007.

Over all, in 2007 the economy created a slight net job gain - around 100,000 positions - in the industries Central Americans tend to work in. This helps to explain why remittance flows continued

to grow in 2007. Only the growth rate of remittances sent to El Salvador fell significantly, from 17% in 2006 to 6.5% in 2007.

This is the first year since 2001 that US employment growth rates have fallen, and it is not yet clear if they will continue to fall. If the trends continue and the US economy does dip into a recession, the BLS report indicates that earnings will likely constrict and the flow of remittances, on which Central American economies have come to rely, will slow and possibly stagnate.

According to the Inter-American Development Bank, remittances represent 12% of Guatemala's GDP, 17% of both Nicaragua's and El Salvador's GDP, and 27% of Honduras' GDP. Roughly four million Central Americans receive remittances; they use 75% of them for daily consumption. An increasing number of remittances are sent from other Central American countries or Europe, but the vast majority still comes from the US. - **Third World Network Features**

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WORLD BANK climate profiteering

Daphne Wysham & Shakuntala Makhijani

With concerns over climate change receiving worldwide attention, the World Bank has entered the fray with a number of initiatives. But the Bank is revealing itself to be a banker for the super-powerful corporate elite rather than a “green bank”, an image it tries to portray.

The World Bank’s long-running identity crisis is proving hard to shake. When efforts to rebrand itself as a “knowledge bank” didn’t work, it devised a new identity as a “Green Bank.” Really? Yes, it’s true.

Sure, the bank continues to finance fossil fuel projects globally, but never mind. The World Bank has seized upon the immense challenges climate change poses to humanity and is now front and centre in the complicated, international world of carbon finance. It can turn the dirtiest carbon credits into gold.

How, exactly, does this work?

The bank finances a fossil fuel project, involving oil, natural gas or coal, in Poor Country A. Rich Country B asks the bank to help arrange carbon credits so Country B can tell its carbon counters it’s taking serious action on climate change. The World Bank kindly obliges, offering carbon credits for a price far lower than Country B would have to pay if it made those cuts at home. Country A gets a share of the cash to invest in equipment to make the fossil fuel project slightly more efficient, the World Bank takes its 13% cut, and everyone is happy.



Everyone, that is, who is cashing in on this deal. If you’re after a real solution to the climate crisis, these shenanigans should make you unhappy.

Aiding the Tata Group

Consider a project the International Finance Corporation — the World Bank’s private sector lending arm — had scheduled for board consideration on March 27, but is now, according to its press office, slated for approval in April. (The World Bank Group’s boards virtually never reject anything sent to them.) The IFC plans to back a massive coal-fired power plant in Mundra, a town in the Indian state of Gujarat. The complex of five 800 megawatt plants will cost US\$4.14 billion to build and be owned and operated by Tata Power Company Limited, a scion of India’s largest multinational corporation, the Tata Group.

Tata Power’s 2007 revenues totalled \$1.6 billion. So it’s hard not to ask how much help Tata needs from the World Bank, which has as its motto “our dream is a world free of poverty”. Several other corporations are involved. Toshiba, for example, will supply the steam turbine generators.

Once operational, the Mundra power plant will be India’s third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases. But

it doesn't stop there. The World Bank has planned for the Tata coal burner to be eligible for carbon credits under the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism. Carbon credits for a coal burner, you ask?

In the bizarre logic of the carbon market — a market the World Bank is both shaping and investing in — yes, Rich Country B can get credits for helping a corporation — even one of the world's wealthiest corporations such as Tata — capture a few carbon emissions, as long as these emissions are captured in a "poor" country, like India, regardless of how rich the company involved may be.

Indonesian coal

It gets stranger still. One would hazard a guess that the IFC is lending \$450 million, "considering investing up to \$50 million in equity as part of its exposure to the project", according to its website, and possibly helping Tata obtain funds from other sources at favorable rates because India has no other choice but to burn its own abundant supply of coal. But, no, the IFC plans to import coal from Indonesia to fuel the plant in India. In fact, Tata bought a 30% stake in two Indonesian coal-mining units for \$1.3 billion in April 2007 in order to secure the coal resources for the Mundra plant.

On its website, the IFC offered this feeble justification for this transaction: "IFC is supporting thermal power projects which have better GHG [greenhouse gas] and environmental performance than the average plants in India, given the country's large needs for incremental electricity supply."

Surely, if the bank is involved, the poor, if not in India, then somewhere else, are better off as a result of this project? In a word,

no. Indonesian coal regulations are largely incoherent and open to manipulation, giving often-corrupt local officials control over the resource wealth, stripping local communities of their resources, and leaving them with a legacy of environmental problems.

Indeed, Indonesia's coal sector is the rule, not the exception, in its posture toward the poor: A three-year review of the World Bank's investments in the extractive industries, the Extractive Industries Review (EIR), launched under former World Bank President James Wolfensohn, found that the poor were worse off as a result of investments in extractive industries, and recommended the World Bank get out of coal immediately. That was back in 2004.

The EIR, ironically, was developed with input from industry, government, and civil society participants, and overseen by former Indonesian environment minister under former Indonesia dictator Suharto, Emil Salim, who himself sat on the board of a large coal company. Nevertheless, Salim was unequivocal that the World Bank should cease lending for coal, and phase out of oil by 2008. The World Bank's board voted to overrule these recommendations.

Sadly, the IFC isn't the only powerful international financial agency backing the Mundra power project. The Asian Development Bank, The Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and the Korea Export Insurance Corporation are also involved.

Climate change mitigation?

OK. The poor are worse off, the corporations are better off, and the bank is double-dipping on carbon trading. Bad enough. But here's

a final, scary twist: the World Bank is increasingly being given a leadership role in various climate investment funds by the world's wealthy countries.

In an initiative with pledged contributions from the US, Britain, and Japan, the bank will oversee \$7-\$12 billion for projects that assist developing countries to mitigate — or adapt to — the effects of climate change. The funds — the Clean Technology Fund, the Forest Investment Fund, the Adaptation/Climate Resilience Pilot Fund, and the Strategic Climate Fund — are moving forward despite having come under fire from developing countries as well as from environment and development organisations. They are concerned that the funds will, once again, give wealthy Northern governments, and, in particular, their bank of choice, the World Bank, more control over funds intended to "help" developing countries.

Rather than a "green bank", the World Bank is revealing itself to be a banker for the super-powerful corporate elite. In addition, it's turning into a climate change profiteer.

If the bank were the only one fooled by its new identity, the image would be pathetic if not outright laughable. Unfortunately, it has seemingly fooled some of the richest and most powerful countries in the world. Or maybe what these wealthy countries really see is not "green" but "greenbacks". — **Third World Network Features**

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Just and democratic governance:

ROLE OF PEOPLE'S MOVEMENT IN GLOBAL SOUTH

Sandeep Chakra

International Governance and Economic Justice Coordinator
Action Aid International

Over the last five years or so, there seems to be more than usual interest on the issue of governance and the use of word 'governance' in developmental and political jargon.

The word being brandished around by multilateral and bilateral donors is 'good governance'. Many of the southern countries, ours included, have suddenly ratcheted up 'good governance' in their national agendas, as if it is a new discovery.

Governance, which has had deep roots in many socio-political traditions, is repackaged and justified by its proponents through use of various theoretical constructs and techno-managerial jargons of what is 'good' – increasing participation, building accountability, building capability, political stability, effectiveness etc. – and what is 'bad'. The 'good' is what developed countries have, and the 'bad' is what developing countries must be self-critical and contemptuous about, and change.

The concept of good governance appears sweet-sounding especially for the millions who live in misery, exploitation and injustice. Governments use these jargons in their promises, but even where they give out cursory balms (such as an administrative response), things on the ground never seem to change. Unfulfilled targets of poverty eradication



PHOTO: TETI LAURON

form the foundations of newer and louder promises, such as those of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), embellished enough to make these new dreams saleable.

We need to look into these seemingly apolitical jargons and see what these have really meant and implemented. We need to unmask what is behind this good governance discourse, and what the proponents of economic globalization – the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF), and others really mean by it.

The idea of good simply means good for the markets and corporates; good for the status quo and existing

elite. It works on the following premises:

1. A push for re-negotiation of the role of the state and markets, where states become regulatory, and overseers of law and order, and markets trump the state;
2. A change in the developmental role of the state with a belief that markets will deliver equity and correct historic injustices;
3. A push for changing the relations of production, on the basic aspects of production; and
4. Push towards privatization of democracy on its economic and other spheres, where economic policy is out of public oversight.

The political intent behind the discourse of good governance is evident, if we just have a look at the “indicators of governance” that governments are induced to work on or forced to adopt – depending upon their own power, economic standing and their existing debt burdens. Thus, the indicators of good governance being used need examination in this light:

The IMF’s indicators for good governance are based on credit rating and security of capital. World Bank’s Development Institute, on the other hand, has churned out six indicators (often known as the Kauffman and Kray Indicators) on assessing good governance.

These Governance Indicator assessments (see examples below) hold themselves liable for interpretation in a very specific manner to propel further the

development ideology of high growth, openness, deregulation, trade liberalization, protection of capital, lack of corruption (all together) = development and success of poverty reduction.

1. Voice and accountability (VA), the extent to which a country’s citizens are able to participate in selecting their government, as well as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and free media.
2. Political stability and absence of violence (PV),

It is through the value -driven contestations of social movements that the foundations of just and democratic processes, wherever and in whatever little measure, are being constructed.

3. Government effectiveness (GE), the quality of public and civil services, and the degree of its independence from political pressures, the quality of policy formulation and implementation, and the credibility of the government’s commitment to such policies.
4. Regulatory quality (RQ), the ability of the government to formulate and implement sound policies and regulations which permit and promote private sector development.
5. Rule of law (RL), the extent to which agents have confidence in and abide by the rules of society, and

in particular the quality of contract enforcement, police, and the courts, as well as the likelihood of crime and violence.

6. Control of corruption (CC), the extent to which public power is exercised for private gain, including both petty and grand forms of corruption, as well as “capture” of the state by elites and private interests.

These indicators are not only important in what they speak on and the context in which these are

located, BUT ALSO IN THEIR SILENCE.

They maintain a studied silence on the basic issues facing poor and excluded citizens from across the globe. These maintain, in their neo-classical, liberal or neo-institutional understanding, a distance from such basic development notions of REDISTRIBUTION and CITIZENSHIP in its substantive sense.

Through the silence of these indicators on vital questions of justice, there is even an attempt to move the question of PEOPLES AGENCY into a minimalist representation of transparency and accountability.

The models of growth which these indications rest on are

itself quite problematic. These models continue to rely on highly extractive growth – which is linked to injunctions to follow orthodox economic policies, like the sample of a speech from the deputy head of IMF, Anne Kruger... “Economic growth is the principal route to lasting poverty reduction... Of course the poorest do not benefit as much as they and we would like... but poverty reduction is best achieved by making the cake bigger, not by cutting it in a different way”.

Of late there has been an emergence of another discourse on “good and democratic governance”. Propelled by other bilateral agencies like the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and others, European Community (EC), and United Nations Development Program (UNDP), we see the emergence of yet another micro-discourse on governance. I would

of markets. This understanding of “good and democratic governance” uses comparatively more radical rhetoric of governance with a humane face, and provides spaces for democratic politics to shape the rights and justice agenda, without however, questioning the role of neo-liberal economic globalization on dimensions of injustice and inequity. This could be understood as a reformist approach to “good governance”.

Recently, DFID in its thinking on building effective states, has introduced, along with notions of governance and development, the role of democratic politics. While still on the reformist end, there have been attempts by this “school” to clarify the thinking on key elements of development which underlie governance, e.g. further efforts are being made to systematize and develop knowledge around vital questions

“Growth Commission” to explore questions around growth while early indications tell us that these will base strongly on the market enhancing governance capacities of the state.

No doubt corruption needs to be checked, as it robs nations and peoples of their sovereignty. However, the World Bank’s push for containing corruption, which is seen in that discourse as the scourge of Africa and habit of Asia, never acknowledges that the worst corruption is contained in the history of colonialism and perpetuated by the STRUCTURES and RULES of hegemonies.

What are the ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS? Or agreements of forcing countries which receive American aid to procure American food?

Hegemonies are established in various ways - through armies, trade, and culture. More and more hegemonies are established and maintained through knowledge and we need to be wary of such ways.

On the knowledge end, the key to bring to the fore is the control that some of these institutions are slowly and systematically exercising over knowledge collation, development, production and dissemination. The World Bank, we all know has been desperately wanting to TRANSMUTATE into the Knowledge Bank. Its World Development Report that is taken by many countries as mantras for national policy formulation contain dangerous pills of systemic and pathway change. In 2006, it spent a whole 500 page



PHOTO: PAN AP

call it a micro-tendency, since it also does not question the dominant paradigm of propulsion

of production, growth and economic development. DFID supported the setting up of a

report to make an intellectual case for its hypothesis that **MARKETS CAN AND DO INDEED DELIVER EQUITY.**

Hence, there is a need to articulate and champion an alternate vision of good governance. The discourse of governance, like the discourse of state, needs to be reclaimed by people, before it is transmuted fully, to suit exclusionary politics.

Such a perspective of governance is inherently linked with the idea that “another world is possible and under construction”. Unless that is clear, the very content and character of governance can be an arena of power manipulations, policy rhetoric and empty promises. After all, the fact remains, that colonialism may have ended, but capital continues to flow from poorer countries to rich ones and from the periphery to the so-called center.

From this perspective, there is need to build not only a theory but a practice of governance based on interdependent dimensions such as democratization, human rights, justice, peoples’ participation, accountability and responsiveness. People are at the center of such a perspective and such a conceptualization of just and democratic governance necessarily includes of inclusive politics as well as working towards a transparent, effective and efficient institutional framework.

From this perspective, the role and the foundation of governance is to transform power relations

and society in a manner where people have spaces to interrogate, influence, challenge and change the direction of development processes and practices. Such a normative framework is based on ethics of human dignity and equality of human persons.

The core of such a perspective is the notion of social transformation through justice, inclusive empowerment, solidarity and transformative politics that ensure spaces for people to participate in institutional arenas and socio-political process in their quest to recognize, realize and expand their human rights, freedoms and entitlements.

Central to the role of social movements is the need to define governance for whom, by whom and for what?

Social movements are the ones contributing to building on this discourse of just and democratic governance. It is through the value-driven contestations of social movements that the foundations of just and democratic processes, wherever and in whatever little measure, are being constructed.

A few examples, in the recent past, of what we can broadly call movement contributions to the discourse stand out. Among these are the peasant struggles in Brazil and elsewhere on the land question. Such processes of challenge to power have led to substantive changes in land tenure and to the formulation of policies which ensure elements of redistribution. The movements in

India have enabled the formulation of a view of governance that is based on accountability to the people (contrast it to the concept of accountability to the capital) on the issues of land and right to information. The movements around extractives and natural resources strongly questioned the privatization of democracy, and brought the discourse on what is public and what is people’s sovereignty.

There is inherent optimism where the struggles are in a process of being and becoming, but this has also brought to fore immense challenges on the continued peripheralization of people, the need for a re-orientation of the concept of development and the need for a stronger position on people’s sovereignty.

Among social movements, a strongly held view is that alternatives do not come from classrooms, they can only be borne at the frontiers of struggles.

One of the biggest threats, which have been identified by some (including Samir Amin) is the issue of fragmentation of resistance. Once again, developing solidarity among peoples, among those exploited and marginalized from the processes of historical injustices, is a key role of social movements in democratizing the local, national and international governance.

(A presentation at the South Asia workshop on People’s Sovereignty and Governance organized by IBON -South Asia last March 2008.)

MORE BAKUNS?

New damaging dams and aluminum plants for Sarawak



PHOTO: XPING/CLICKR.COM

We are writing to express our strong opposition against the proposal made by the Sarawak State Government to build another two hydro-electric dams in Murum and

Limbang in Sarawak as well as our concern on the manner in which the Sarawak state Government conducts its economic and development planning in the state.

The Bakun Hydroelectric Project alone has incurred a huge cost, caused the forced relocation of 10,000 people and will inundate 69,000 hectares. Today, although the construction has yet to be completed, the dam may be adversely affected by the development of three large plantations within its water catchment site.

According to the 9th Malaysian Plan, in 2005, the energy reserve margin of Sarawak was 28.7% and with the anticipated power generation increase of 400 MW by the year 2010, the reserve margin by then will still be around 23.5%. Thus, in truth, Sarawak does not need the three dams at all.

The low energy demand in Sarawak means that the construction on the Bakun, Murum and Limbang dams will benefit high energy-consuming industries like that of aluminum processing rather than the public. The construction of aluminum smelters in close proximity to hydro-electric dams are common phenomenon and sometimes such smelting plants are able to purchase energy at a very low rate at the expense of the taxpayers' money. Because the energy from Bakun clearly has no potential customers, and more so for the proposed Murung and Limbang dams, we have a real cause for concern.

The proposal to turn Sarawak into a center of the aluminum industry is indeed a high risk venture. Many mining companies, including those from the aluminum industry, have often created controversy abroad as result of allegations on environmental and human rights violations.

The electrolysis process used to smelt alumina can involve more than 25 dangerous chemical substances including toxic carbon and fluoride compounds and heavy metals like mercury and lead, cyanide and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH). Depending

on the methods in which the smelting wastes are managed, such substances can be spread by air, water and soil, polluting surrounding plants and entering into the human food chain.

Smelters also are known to produce a variety of dangerous gases from fluoride compounds, hydrogen sulfide, and nitrogen dioxide to sulphur dioxide, which can cause acid rain. Exposure to hydrogen sulfide and other fluoride compounds can cause much damage to the human respiratory system as well as serious skin disorders and pulmonary edema.

The province of Lac-Saint-Jean/Saguenay in Canada, with four aluminum smelting plants with the combined capacity of 1.23 million per ton annually, has very high cancer rate amongst its population and the highest rate of infant disability in the country. At the province level, it has the highest death rates cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases as well as malignant tumors. Worst, a fifth of its Beluga whale population are also inflicted by cancer, something which has never been observed elsewhere. Tissues from the whales were indeed found to be contaminated by a high rate of PAH compounds.

In Texas, its health department has forbidden the consumption of fishes and crabs in the Lavaca Bay, close to an aluminum processing complex which is found to be contaminated by mercury. In India, fluoride contamination in its water sources has caused its population to suffer from brittle bones as well as dental, gum and skin diseases and a host of fluorosis symptoms.

Thus it is also not surprising that workers of aluminum processing plants are also known to generally suffer from a variety of health problems, from urinary tract, skin and lung cancers to mesothelioma.

In terms of emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG), the smelting of a ton of alumina will produce 7-12 tons of carbon dioxide due to its high energy consumption. However, the smelting process of alumina also produces other GHG's which are far more powerful than that of carbon dioxide. The emission of a ton of tetrafluoromethane in 100 years will have the same impacts with the emissions of 6.5 metric tons of carbon dioxide. A ton of hexafluoroethane has the same capacity as 109 tons of carbon dioxide. The latest generation of alumina smelting plants will produce around 0.3-1 kg of such gases for a ton of processed aluminum.

All the facts will be even more worrying because the annual capacity of the Bintulu plant

is proposed at 550,000 metric tons in its initial stages before being increased to the maximum capacity of 1.5 million metric tons. This is indeed a very high production rate.

Recent news has reported that the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Report for the project will be completed in 15 months' time.

In our view, this process must be made with full public participation before any approvals are given, as required under the Environmental Quality Act which is in force at the Federal level.

However, we would still like to request that the Sarawak State and Federal Governments take the most rational decision, which is to scale down the capacity of Bakun and call off the proposed Murum and Limbang dams. The proposal to turn Sarawak into a center for the aluminum industry cannot be said to be a sustainable development option. **Consumers Association of Penang**



PHOTO: XPING/FILCKR.COM



Greetings from the desaparecidos from the Philippines.

The Desaparecidos is an organization of about 100 members who are either victims or families of victims of enforced disappearances. Its members are bound by one unifying common experience: that of having been a victim of the cruelest crime of enforced disappearance. The Desaparecidos is probably the only organization where we do not want more members.

Enforced disappearance is the worst kind of human rights violation because its effects are far reaching not only on the one abducted who is taken out of the protection of the law and is thus vulnerable to the most inhuman treatment, but also on the relatives and friends of the abducted who must suffer the agony of uncertainty of the fate suffered by the loved one.

There are many of us. There are 185 reported cases of recorded disappearances, but there are more cases which remain unrecorded and unreported because the victims and their families are either afraid or do not have the resources to go to the nearest Karapatan office.

A mother's SEARCH for JONAS

Edita Tronqued Burgos, Ed.D.

Now let me tell you about Jonas.

Jonas shouted "*Aktibista lang po ako*" (I am just an activist) several times, addressing his first plea to the waitress who became our witness, and then to the other diners at the restaurant. Jonas shouted several times more as he was being dragged by four men and one woman. The restaurant was full of customers as it was noontime. Jonas was alone and unarmed. No one helped him. No one lifted a finger nor whispered a query to those who were forcing Jonas. If somebody so much as whispered a protest, would the perpetrators still carry out the abduction knowing they are identified?

Yet no one helped. These are the signs of the times. We stand in the sidelines, in the safety of our silence and allow an injustice, a crime to be carried out.

This was 10 months ago. To this date we have not found Jonas. We still do not have any hint of whether he is alive or not or where he is hidden, although we know who took him. We would like to know who is responsible for the abduction, and that is why we are determined to continue searching until the whole truth about Jonas comes out.

Why was Jonas abducted?

There is a pattern in the abductions. One need not be any particular kind of person to be abducted, except to be critical of the state. Jonas was a horticulturist. He finished BS Agriculture and his forte was organic farming. Since he was very much involved with farmers, he became a member of the Alyansang Magbubukid ng Bulacan (Bulacan Peasant Alliance). He organized farmer groups and taught them their rights. Jonas was very critical of the government whom he perceived as wanting in its support for farmers.

But one need not be a critic though. There are cases where family members of community organizers have been abducted instead.

Family's Actions

Establishing that Jonas was somewhere but unable to go home, we called for a press conference to seek the aid of the media to locate him. At that time, I thought he could be in a hospital, hurt and unable to move. I appealed to anyone who has any information on Jonas, to call us up. I got a call from a nameless

responsibility from her but failed to make anyone accountable... from the execution, investigation up to the prosecution, state forces who perpetrate the killings and disappearances seemed to be untouchable." On the contrary, at the State of Nation delivered by GMA in Congress, she praised General Jovito Palparan (identified by countless victims as instrumental in so many human

shouted "police!". The guard did back off but he managed to list down the van's plate number.

Thank God for that piece of evidence. This evidence has led us to find out the complicated web of deceit and cover up perpetrated by the highest officials of the state forces of the land.

As I listened to the witness relate how Jonas' abduction was carried out, I could not believe that no one attempted to help. No one, not even a whisper of protest was heard. A whisper could have made the difference. I made a resolve at that time, that never shall I let an opportunity pass me by. I shall try to help within my capacity. But I shall help.

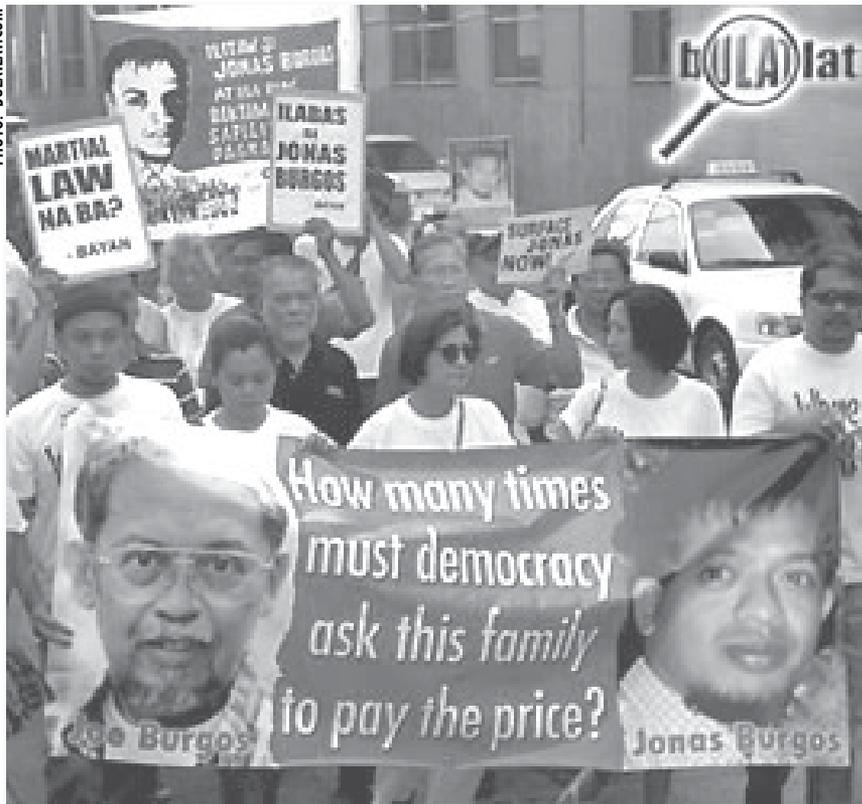
What steps did we take?

I went to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police, the Supreme Court, the Executive Department particularly the executive secretary who was a family friend and even the President herself, whom I wrote.

The investigation was done in a sloppy manner. Some leads were not investigated and some people involved were not summoned. The Commission of Human Rights terminated the public hearings after four months blaming me for not cooperating. Adding insult to injury, the Armed Forces of the Philippines was enjoined to continue its investigation in the Jonas Case. The CHR already knew that officers of the Armed Forces were respondents in the case and yet, the commissioners expected them to make an impartial investigation.

Nothing happened with the supposed investigation. But the CHR public hearing set the record

PHOTO: BULATLAT.COM



and faceless informant who told me he witnessed a kidnapping in Ever Gotesco Mall.

You are probably wondering how anyone can be abducted in broad daylight with so many witnesses, the abductors not wearing masks or disguise that it would be easy to identify them.

Because no one has been held accountable let alone convicted for human rights violation, Karapatan reports "Gloria Arroyo has successfully deflected

rights violations) for a 'job well done'. The message is thus relayed to all: killing, disappearances is alright for as long as the enemy 'deserves' to die.

Jonas was positively identified by the waitress who became our witness. A guard of the mall told the court that he saw a man struggling helplessly as he was lifted by four men, holding him on both arms and legs and forced into a waiting van. The guard was about to approach the men, but backed off as soon as they

straight that Jonas was not considered an enemy of the state, and that he was not in the military's order of battle.

PHOTO: BUATLAT.COM

Last September 20, 2007 I filed the information on Jonas' disappearance with the Working Group for Enforced and Involuntary Disappearance (WGEID) of the United Nations in Geneva.

Demonization

Meanwhile, the military would use another tactic, i.e. demonization. In a press announcement in July 2007, a military officer said that Jonas is a member of the New People's Army (NPA, the armed group of the Communist Party of the Philippines) and that he is a communist. The military is now claiming that Jonas was a victim of an internal purge of the NPA.

This, too, is a pattern we have seen in the abductions. First, they abduct anyone who is critical of the government, and then when the family and friends look for this person, they say he is a member of the CPP-NPA and is a victim either of an internal purge or an encounter between soldiers and the NPA.

We, the relatives, consequently become tainted. The 'red



herring' taint conditions people to believe that it is right to do away with these people who are 'communists'. And of course we know that this is not so. There can be no debate about forcible disappearance or abduction being wrong. There can never be any debate about extrajudicial killing to being wrong and a sin.

So what must we do?

We are brought to this circumstance for a reason. We cannot just seat back and resign

ourselves to our fate. Resign is a sad word, an unloving word. We cannot live a life characterized by fear and helplessness. For those who are paralyzed into inaction because of fear, let me tell you that that is precisely how the perpetrators want us to react. In fact all these are in aid of sowing fear among the populace. We cannot allow this, because as Edmund Burke said "All that is necessary for the forces of evil to win in this world is for enough good men to do nothing."

Indeed I consider this not a fight between people, nor a fight between ideologies. It is the fight between good and evil. The tortures described by those who have survived their abduction are proof of this.

Today I bring my case before you so that you will have the opportunity to be involved. This would be a challenge for all to be 'good neighbors' across the oceans.

I appeal to all. Perhaps by coming to the land of the free, I will find my Jonas.

Abridged version of a talk delivered at the Ecumenical Advocacy Days conference, March 8-9, 2008, Alexandria Hilton, Washington D.C., and at the speaking tour in key cities in the USA on March 1-19, 2008.

CAESARIAN EPIDEMIC

How modern technology changes natural childbirth into a major public health problem

Utusan Konsumer

PHOTO: MAHALIEK



Childbirth is a very natural process that nature has successfully refined through tens of thousands of years. The knowledge of how to give birth has passed down through generations in our genes. Childbirth should thus be the same for today's modern woman as it was for a woman living in a tropical jungle thousands of years ago.

But for a growing number of women today, the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth are riddled with feeling of fear, doubt and anxiety. The reason: doctors today treat birth as if it was an illness – and pregnant women are treated like sick people.

Most pregnancies and births today are medically managed. As childbirth increasingly “requires” medical intervention, most women “give up” responsibility for childbirth rather than “going along” with the process. Pregnant women thus inevitably go through a medical experience – from the time a woman discovers she is pregnant to the day her baby is born and even after that, she is subjected to routine use of technology in a laboratory setting.

In hi-fi obstetrics care, pregnancy is seen as a “risky condition” that requires medical intervention. The modern management of pregnancy and birth has, in fact, been described as “prenatal care that expects trouble”. As a result, women today have come to believe that childbirth is too dangerous and painful to endure without doctors and hospitals.

Childbirth today has become so increasingly influenced by medical technology that in most Western countries, medical intervention is now the norm. Young women in these countries end up learning attitudes about childbirth that are not positive. They grow up fearing and not understanding the whole process of having a baby.

But what is of greater concern is this: according to some obstetricians, birth today has become too medicalized – at the expense of both mother and child. One worrying aspect is the caesarean section, a major abdominal surgery for childbirth.

Over the last four decades, the rate of unnecessary caesarean births has grown in alarming manner and gynaecologists, obstetricians and healthcare administrators throughout the world have not managed to slow it down, notes *The Lancet*, one of the most respected medical journals in the world, in its 3 June 2006 issue.

In many countries with high caesarean rates today, experts believe the surgery is an unnecessary intervention in an increasing number of modern-day births.

The World Health Organisation (WHO), which charts global health trends, has been sounding the alarm on the caesarean trend, citing statistics that show the number of caesarean sections in developed countries has been on the increase in recent years, and is often performed for non-medical reasons.

RISKS for BABY, RISKS for MOTHER

A caesarean section, or a c-section, is major abdominal surgery where surgeons make a series of separate incisions in the mother. Cuts are made in the skin, underlying muscles and abdomen first, and then in the uterus, to allow removal of the infant. Like all major surgeries, there are risks involved in this case, to both mother and the new-born.

Babies born by caesarean not only don't have the benefit of labor,

which squeezes fluid out of the new-born's lungs, stimulates the baby's ability to regulate body temperature, and may promote the release of hormones that encourage healthy lung function, they face serious risks to their lives, too.

Risks for the baby include the following:

- Premature birth. In a planned C-section, if the due date was not accurately calculated, the baby could be delivered too early. Removed too soon by caesarean, the baby can suffer respiratory distress syndrome, transient tachypnea (abnormally fast breathing during the first few days after birth) and other lung disorders, feeding problems and various complications, which in some cases, require a long hospital stay;
- Foetal injury. Although rare, the surgeon can accidentally nick the baby while making the uterine incision; and
- Death. Infants are more likely to die from a caesarean than vaginal birth.

Risks for the mother are also grave:

- Infection. The uterus or nearby pelvic organs, such as the bladder or kidneys, can become infected;
- Increase blood loss. Blood loss on the average is about twice as much with caesarean birth. However, blood transfusions are rarely needed during a caesarean;
- Reactions to anaesthesia. The mother's health could be endangered by unexpected responses (such as blood pressure that drops quickly) to anaesthesia or other medications during the surgery;
- Risk of additional surgeries – eg: hysterectomy, bladder repair, etc.;
- Blood clots in the legs, pelvic organs, or lungs;
- Bowel or bladder injury; and
- Respiratory complications. General anaesthesia can sometimes lead to pneumonia.

Caesarean, though useful in warranted cases, is thus a risky operation that should be avoided in normal, healthy pregnancies.



PHOTO: ERICH SCHULZ

Yet, today birth by c-section has reached an all-time high. In some countries today, it is even being offered as a choice for childbearing women to deliver their babies, of what is known as elective caesarean.

How common is the caesarean culture? Let's look at the statistics.

Sky-high rates

The WHO states that no region in the world is justified in having a caesarean rate greater than 10-15%. These are the optimal levels for the best outcomes for mothers and babies. Any country with a caesarean rate above 15%, according to the WHO, should be looking at the reasons why.

Yet in countries with modern health care systems, the rate of caesareans is many times higher than this.

In Australia, about 40% of all births are caesareans and some medical experts believe they will soon become the norm. David Ellwood, a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the Australian National University suggests 90% of births in Australia will be via caesarean within the next 2 decades (The Daily Telegraph, 11.3.07).

In Brazil, caesareans account for nearly 40% of births, three

times the maximum limit of 15% recommended by the WHO. According to 2001 figures, more than 36% of all births here are by caesarean section; many private hospitals report rates in the 80-90% range.

In Italy, the rate is reported to be 32.9%.

In the US, the caesarean rate was 30.2% in 2005, up from 26% in 2002. The caesarean rate here has in fact, risen 46% since 1996. There were 1.2 million caesarean births here in 2004 alone.

In Canada, the rate was 22.5% during 2001-2002.

In the United Kingdom, the caesarean rate was about 20% in 2004. Today it has risen to above 23%.

The high rate of caesarean sections in most western countries is now regarded as a major public health problem and has spawned much discussion, numerous publications and meetings, and varied recommendations (study in Social Science Medicine, 1998).

The same trend has also been noted in other non-Western countries.

Nigeria is reported to have a caesarean rate of 34.6%.

Asian countries seem to be headed the same way, and from the statistics, the situation could be worse here.

In China, the ratio of caesarean births has soared to 50%, from a mere 5% in the 1950s-1970s, far exceeding the standard of 15% set by the WHO (Xinhua Economic News, 15.2.07). Some urban hospitals have a c-section rate of more than 60%!

In South Korea, it is reported that caesarean section rates for 263 hospitals there were 45.9%, 42.7% and 44.6% in 1999, 2000 and 2001, respectively – rates that surpass those of western countries and that are also higher than the WHO recommendation.

In Thailand, the caesarean rate is reported to have increased, from 15.2% in 1990 to 22.4% in 1996.

In Singapore, it is reported that 31% of women who gave birth in 2003 had a caesarean, up from 24.5% a decade ago.

In Malaysia, official figures are lacking, but from statistics in the few available studies on maternal complications and deaths reported, child-bearing women are also exposed to similar risks. **Consumers Association of Penang**



Dear Senator Arroyo,

I am a Filipina in America where I have lived for the last 24 years. I have retained my Filipino citizenship all these years with the hope of retiring in the land of my birth in a few years, specifically in San Jose, Antique.

Why are you selling my patrimony, our beautiful land? Please junk JPEPA -- that unpatriotic agreement sealed in secrecy by our President with Japan.

The JPEPA is one big sellout of our sovereignty and our land! It is even worse than the ZTE-NBN deals. PLEASE JUNK JPEPA !

The Philippine Senate should NOT ratify it as a treaty. I do not approve selling our land and endangering the very life of our present and future generation of Filipinos. PLEASE JUNK JPEPA !

Thank you.

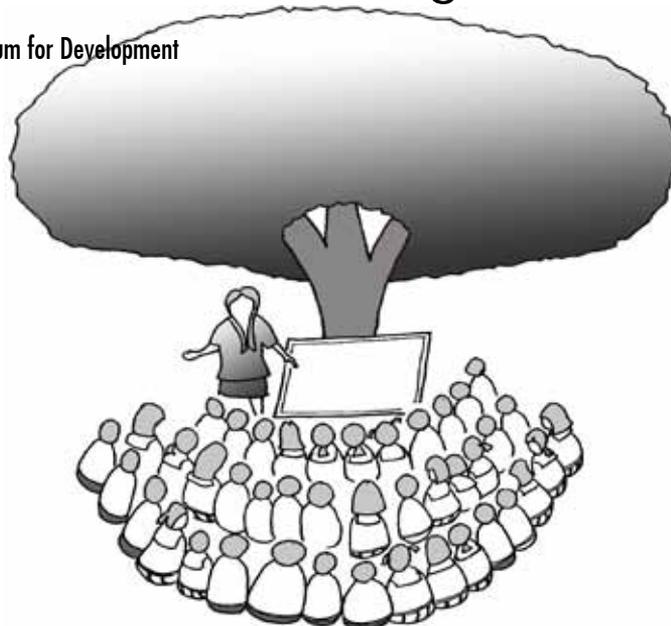
*LINDA MARIA NIETES-LITTLE
(Mrs. Robert J. Little, Jr.)*

Linda Nietes, a cultural activist, also owned Casalinda, the first all-Filipiniana bookshop in the Philippines, (Metro Manila, 1972-1983) and has provided a home for Philippine writings on both sides of the Pacific. She emailed this message to the office of Senator Joker Arroyo on April 18.

MILLION-DOLLAR 'KICKBACK'

could have paid for public school shortages

Educators' Forum for Development



Crisis in the Philippine education sector is deepening as manifested by high dropout rate, deteriorating quality, rising resource shortages, and intensifying exploitation of teachers. And yet the highest officials of the country are embroiled in billion-peso anomalies and continue to enrich themselves with public funds with impunity.

Take, for instance, the ZTE corruption scandal that is currently hounding the Arroyo government. The exposed \$130-million “kickback” (or P5.2 billion in current exchange rate) from the \$329-million National Broadband Network project with China’s ZTE Corporation would have paid for the following:

- 44,234,813 textbooks (P2.78 billion);
- 1,390 classrooms (P760 million);
- 524,237 school seats (P420 million);
- 2,733 new teachers (P330 million); and
- computer-related expenses of 98 schools (P910 million).

The ZTE “kickback” could have covered almost 62% of the P8.4-billion total cost of the Department of Education’s estimated 2008 resource gaps, which include classrooms, seats, teachers, principals, and textbooks.

Moreover, a year’s computer expenses of 100 public schools make up barely 0.2% of the controversial loot. Based on the 2006 Commission on Audit report that said schoolchildren from over 100 public schools were compelled to pay a total of P9.26 million for computers and operating costs of computer laboratories, the ZTE “kickback” would easily liberate all public schools (45,430) from charging their students such fees, and still leave P993 million more to spare. P993 million can actually pay for the basic salary of 1,665 public school teachers for five years.

This only shows how much losses from corruption could possibly resolve inadequacies in the education sector and free poor families from the burden of additional school expenses. Corruption heavily affects the poor majority as it reduces the already scant amount spent for social services, making their delivery worse than ever.

As educators committed to social transformation, the Educators’ Forum for Development (EFD) condemns the fraud, lies, and thievery in the Arroyo administration and joins other sectors in the clamor for change, not only of governance but of the whole system that breeds corruption.

The overall lack of accountability and transparency, and the persistent question of legitimacy of the Arroyo government, show that the fight against corruption lies with the people who must assert good governance and protection of their rights. EFD believes that educators have a special role in molding future generations who will uphold integrity and social responsibility and stand against any form of corruption.

The Educators’ Forum for Development (EFD) is an association of educators committed to social transformation. It was established in 2002 by the IBON Partnership in Education for Development and other progressive educators, including founding chairperson Bienvenido Lumbrera.



Watch father fish
@Ma. Theresa Nera-lauron /APRNIBON