

# The global market for population growth

By Mohammed Akacem

The U.N. conference on population and development began in Cairo amid threats of violence from Muslim fundamentalists.

Saudi Arabia boycotted the conference, and according to Saudi radio, the conference is a "a ferocious assault on . . . Islamic society." Moreover, the Catholic church denounced the conference as an attack on the family.

The conference is not likely to succeed in reaching its ultimate goal of slowing the growth of world

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population unless it addresses the myriads of incentives and forces that are the root cause of the problem. Empowering women through education and jobs is not only old hat, but is not likely to work.

It is not unreasonable to argue that the fast-growing world population ultimately will strain world resources if something is not done. However, the means by which the conference plans to achieve this result will not do the job. Family planning is an elitist form of arrogance that tells the poor, "We know what is best for you."

Let us remember that the poor in the Third World do not have much of a voice in anything. Now they are about to be told that the only free choice that they have, regarding the most personal decisions concerning their family size, is no longer theirs to make.

No one is suggesting that families in the Third World will be physically forced to limit the size of their families. However, one aspect of family planning that is often forgotten is that from the standpoint of the poor, uneducated family in the Third World, a visit from a family planner is looked at differently. Whereas the social worker may see her mission as purely providing information regarding choices (other than the choice of a larger family, of course), the recipient of that information often perceives it as an order to conform or else. In much of the Third World, where individual rights are non-existent, anything that comes down from the government is automatically looked on as an order to conform.

Another aspect of the population debate that is also ignored

relates to the different incentives that families face. On the one hand, basic goods and services are subsidized in a number of countries to the point where it is a bit easier to raise a larger family on a meager income. Take Egypt, for example. The country has essentially a pronatalist policy, and yet it has been chosen as the site for the conference on population and development. There is an array of subsidies for basic foodstuffs as well as a guaranteed job after graduation for every Egyptian — never mind that the government cannot fulfill the latter promise.

These kinds of incentives are offered to the poor in the Third World. Furthermore, the economic system is such that unless you are born rich or quite connected with the establishment, your chances to make it financially, beyond the level

of basic subsidies, are almost nil. No wonder, then, that a large family size appears perfectly rational to the average family in the Third World. Larger families ensure a slightly higher income as well as a form of social security in the later years of the parents' life.

Now comes the difficult aspect of population control. This one deals with religious, cultural and, in some parts of the world, tribal or ethnic aspects of the issue. How are we to convince any group that a smaller family is better for it in the long run? Look at Sub-Saharan Africa, with tribal warfare sure to continue, as in Rwanda and later in Burundi. The former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are no exception, with ethnic rivalries such as in the former Yugoslavia. In Asia, many of the same forces are at work. The bottom line is that with the "balkanization" of parts of the globe, ethnic and religious differences will prove to be a major stumbling block against the U.N. goal of slower population growth.

One approach that needs to be considered is a combination of economic and political openness within the areas of the world that are responsible for the bulk of the growth in population. If people believe that they do have a stake in the economic system and can better their lives through sheer hard work, then their need to have a larger family will diminish.

Opening the economic system means an end to the control of the economy by the state or by its cronies. Opening the political system means creating the proper institutions that would safeguard the rights of all, regardless of your ethnic, religious or cultural background. Doing so will remove the reliance on sheer numbers to safeguard one's rights.

We should not expect too much from the population conference if it merely relies on governments to deliver its message, without a profound change in the economic and political map of the developing world.