



EU's Expansion in Iraq Thwarted by Lack of Security

David Cronin

BRUSSELS, Mar 12 (IPS) - The European Union lacks clear guidelines for use of private security firms to protect its civil servants operating in Iraq, a new report has found. The 'outsourcing' of military tasks to commercial companies has proven hugely controversial since the U.S. invaded Iraq five years ago. In September 2007, the Iraqi authorities blamed the U.S. security firm Blackwater for a gun battle in which 11 people died. Allegations that Blackwater fired indiscriminately at civilians followed a litany of complaints that such firms, which also provide bodyguards to diplomats from European countries, have shown scant

regard for human rights.

A report debated by the European Parliament Mar. 12 insisted that there should be transparency from EU governments about the use of these firms. Unless clear rules are established to cover the firms' activities, it will be extremely difficult for the European Parliament to agree to an expansion of the EU's physical presence in Iraq, the paper warned. Over 800 million euros (1.2 billion dollars) has been pledged by the EU's executive, the European Commission, to rebuilding Iraq since 2003. Yet the report alleges that the Union's efforts have not been successful in substantially improving the situation on the ground.

Continued on page 2

Climate Change Most Vulnerable Left to Sink or Swim

Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, Mar 12 (IPS) - The world's minorities and indigenous groups are the silent victims of the potentially disastrous effects of climate change, says a new study by Minority Rights Group (MRG) International. Although both groups are often disproportionately affected by climate-related disasters, the international community continues to ignore their plight, the London-based human rights organisation charges. The report points out that even though climate change has finally made it to the top of the international agenda, recognition of the acute difficulties that minorities face is often missing.

"From the immediate aftermath of a disaster to the point of designing policy on climate change, the unique situation of minority and indigenous groups is rarely considered", said Ishbel Matheson, MRG's head of policy and communications. The disadvantaged include the Dalits (or untouchables) of India, the Rakhain fishing community in Bangladesh, the pastoralists of Kenya, the Karamajong community in Uganda, the Afro-Colombians in Colombia, the Roma communities in Europe and the Sami people of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia.

When the Dalits in Bihar, India, were disproportionately affected during the 2007 floods, relief was a long time in coming and they were subject to blatant discrimination in the aid distribution process, the report says. The close relationship of many indigenous peoples and some minorities to their environment makes them especially sensitive to the impact of climate change,

Continued on page 2

Malaysia Ushers In Democracy

Marwaan Macan-Markar

BANGKOK, Mar 12 (IPS) - Following last weekend's general elections, Malaysia finds itself firmly among South-east Asia's promising democracies that afford space for strong opposition voices to rein in their governments. The impressive showing of the opposition parties at Saturday's poll saw the ruling National Front (NF) coalition (or Barisan Nasional), lose its dominant grip on power after 40 years. Opposition lawmakers won 82 out of the 222 seats in the parliament, a dramatic increase from the 19 seats they had held in the outgoing legislature. The opposition also gained control of five of Malaysia's 13 states.

Till this month's poll, the NF had

continued to enjoy a two-thirds majority in parliament, consequently giving rise to strong autocratic leaders like the former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who ruled the country for 22 years. But the current leader, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, faces a new political reality, after the governing coalition he led won 140 seats, a little over 60 percent of the constituencies. "We are very surprised with the results, but it is clear that the issues we campaigned on like corruption, the economy and high crime rate struck a chord with the electorate," said Teresa Kok, who was returned to parliament for the third time for the opposition Democratic Action Party.

"Finally, the people of Malaysia felt bold

Continued on page 5

Continued from page 1

Ana Gomes, the Portuguese Member of Parliament (MEP) who wrote the report, said she did not believe that Iraq needs more money but greater technical assistance to ensure its state functions and that there is greater freedom in its society. Despite her demand for caution in the use of private security firms, she contended that the Union has a golden opportunity to bring a positive contribution to the fate of Iraq and the fate of the entire region. Estimates of the death toll from the war vary widely. As the U.S. does not keep tabs on civilian casualties, the task of trying to gauge how many have died has fallen to scientific researchers and a number of non-governmental organisations.

One such group, Iraq Body Count, says that documented deaths caused by U.S.-led coalition forces, paramilitary and criminals since the invasion exceeds 89,000. Another, the U.S. campaign group Just Foreign Policy, suggests that the number of deaths attributable to the U.S. invasion could exceed one million. Yet while Iraq is struggling to emerge from such a deadly conflict, the EU is deeply involved in talks aimed at boosting trade with the country. Four rounds of negotiations aimed at signing a trade and cooperation accord between the Union and Iraq have taken place so far. Caroline Lucas, a British Green MEP, urged the Union to tread carefully in these talks.

Decrees issued by L. Paul Bremer, appointed by the Bush administration to run Iraq temporarily in 2003, privatised 200 state companies and allowed foreign firms to completely own Iraqi banks, mines and factories. Accusing the U.S. of privatising public property, Lucas said that "the aim of the EU should not be merely to win business for European firms but to build up Iraqi companies, too." "There is a risk of the country becoming once again prey to outside influence", she said. The European Parliament also expressed concern about the plight of the 4.5 million people displaced by the war. Iraq has a population of 25 million.

Batrice Patrie, a French Socialist, noted that this was the biggest movement of people in that part of the world since 1948. About two million Iraqi refugees are now in Syria and Jordan. Patrie argued that the EU should welcome some of the most vulnerable refugees onto its territory. Portuguese MEP Paolo Casaca stated that the EU's support for refugees has been woefully inadequate. "There are destitute people there who have no access to oil revenues", he said. These are people we must try to support. But Bastiaan Belder, MEP with the Dutch party Christian Union, distanced himself from calls for the EU to offer refuge to displaced Iraqis. "How realistic is it to ask governments to welcome in refugees?" he said.

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European commissioner for external relations, said that the security situation seems to be partly better in Iraq as a result of a surge in U.S. troops and the ceasefire called by militia leader Moqtada al-Sadr. But she added that the number of deaths of Iraqi civilians still remains too high and that recent incursions by Turkish troops into Northern Iraq -- officially in response to attacks by the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) -- contribute to complicating the situation. Janez Lenarcic, state secretary for European affairs with Slovenia, which holds the EU's rotating presidency, said dialogue between Turkey and Iraq is important in order to find an amicable solution and avoid conflict. British Liberal MEP Emma Nicholson, who is to chair a new parliamentary

body responsible for relations with Iraq, said that the price of a stable Iraq is worthy of our effort. Iraq, she added, will border the European Union once Turkey is accepted into the EU fold.

Continued from page 1

it points out. "Indigenous people have extraordinarily intimate knowledge of weather and its effects on plants and animals, but climate change is now affecting their way of life", the report adds.

David Pulkol from Uganda's Karamajong community is quoted as saying: "In our community the elders interpret certain signs from nature to know when to plant their crops or when to start the hunting season. But with climate change it is becoming impossible for them to make such predictions anymore." "We have had an unusual increase in droughts which has resulted in greater loss to livestock and increased poverty and starvation in our community", Pulkol adds. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says global warming and more extreme weather events can, to a large extent, be attributed to the burning of fossil fuels and other polluting activities, which are raising the levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.

Responding to a question, MRG's Matheson told IPS that the United Nations and its environmental bodies definitely have a role to play in focusing attention on the plight of minorities hardest hit by climate change. However, the difficulty is that until very recently, most of the controversy around global warming has focused on the extent to which humans have caused the global warming, and to charting the real and projected environmental effects, she added. She said the U.N.-organised negotiations have obviously been around measures to curb the levels of carbon dioxide emissions, or to mitigate their effects.

"This is obviously a priority [and is the focus of the successor talks of the Kyoto Protocol on climate change]. But given that the actual effects of global warming are already being felt at a human level, then policy-makers need to look beyond the environment impacts to the impact on communities -- and which communities are disproportionately affected, including minorities and indigenous communities", Matheson added. She noted that the U.N. Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples has already taken up this issue -- and has published a number of reports on it. The theme of the upcoming seventh session of the Permanent Forum, scheduled to take place Apr. 21-May 2, will be "climate change, bio-cultural diversity and livelihoods: the stewardship role of indigenous peoples and new challenges."

"Climate change is considered to be a critical global challenge and recent events have demonstrated the world's growing vulnerability to climate change", says a study that will go before the Permanent Forum next month. For indigenous peoples, climate change is already a reality and poses threats and dangers to the survival of their communities. The study warns that climate change also has serious economic and social implications. "Climate change is, fundamentally, a sustainable development challenge, that should be linked more firmly to the broader development agenda, including

Continued on page 3

to poverty reduction and other internationally agreed development goals", the study adds.

At a conference of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in New York last September, several representatives pointed that key challenges facing indigenous groups included the impact of mono-culture plantations; mass migration; poor water quality; food security; human health and infrastructure. An international expert workshop on indigenous peoples in Russia last August focused on environmental damage, including pollution and toxic dumping on indigenous peoples' lands.

According to the MRG report, indigenous and minority communities across the world are also hurt by the planting of biofuel crops, which have been championed by many governments as one solution to climate change. Biofuels, derived from plant matter such as corn or oil palms, are seen as the greener option because they produce lower emissions of carbon dioxide. But communities face forceful eviction and destruction to their livelihoods and culture for biofuel crops to be planted, the report notes. In South American countries such as Colombia, Brazil and Argentina, indigenous and minority communities have been forced off their lands, in some cases violently, to make way for biofuel plantations. Social marginalisation is another factor.

In Kenya, pastoralists have borne the brunt of recent cycles of drought. But the effects are exacerbated by the Kenyan government's neglect of these remote areas, and its failure to implement successful drought strategies. The explosion of bio-fuel crops is particularly problematic. In Colombia, for example, by 2005, more than 90 percent of the land planted with oil palms had belonged to Afro-Columbian communities. Violent displacements because of paramilitary groups are consolidated as oil palm companies move in to take over, Matheson added. She said the 50 Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are drawing up National Adaptation Programmes of Action, under the auspices of the U.N., to lay out the steps they must take to combat the effects of climate change.

"But they are under no compulsion during this process to pay attention to the special needs of minorities and indigenous peoples, she said. The U.N. Environment Programme (UNEP) and the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) are often the lead U.N. agencies which work with the LDCs to draw up their adaptation plans. "They too need to look at the impact on minorities -- such as the Rakhain fishing community in Bangladesh -- to address the fact that, for these communities, it is not simply a matter of loss of livelihood or a loss of culture, but their very survival", Matheson said.

Lebanon: Time to Step Back From the Brink

Khody Akhavi

WASHINGTON, Mar 12 (IPS) - Describing the current Lebanese political impasse as a moment pregnant with incredible danger, a U.S. expert Tuesday urged rival factions and their international patrons to adopt of a formula of no victim, no vanquished in order

to mitigate a possible descent into civil war. "When I think back to that horrible day in March of 1975, when the [Lebanese] civil war began, go back to the newspapers from that period. You don't pick up El-Nahar [newspaper] the next morning and it says 'civil war starts in Lebanon'," said Augustus Richard Norton, an expert on the Shi'a of Lebanon who teaches international relations at Boston University. "No, you collapse into a civil war, you sort of incrementally slide into a civil war, and that's my great fear today", said Norton during a panel discussion at Georgetown University's School for Foreign Service.

The logic of one side coming out on top in this game, and one side being vanquished is a very, very foolish logic, and it is confounded by both logic and Lebanese history. Lebanon is currently embroiled in its worst political crisis since the end of its 1975-90 civil war. The year-long power struggle between the Western-backed government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and the opposition, led by Hezbollah, has been exacerbated by a three-month presidential deadlock. Ever since pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud left office on Nov. 23 without a successor being elected, the impasse has created a new and dangerous status quo, one which has fomented sectarian tension and witnessed continued political assassinations.

The current paralysis of the Lebanese government has also exposed domestic actors' dependence on international powers such as the U.S., Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran -- each with presumably different motivations and end goals, which further complicate a solution for the immediate domestic conflict. To reduce Lebanon's current political impasse to a proxy conflict between the U.S. and Iran, or to define it as a battle for democratic values between the legitimate government of a burgeoning democracy -- as the Bush administration describes the anti-Syrian March 14 Alliance -- and the Iranian-supported March 8 Alliance portends an ominous future for the country.

"The presidential vacuum has taken on an entirely different meaning and weight", said Bassam Haddad, the director of the Middle East Studies Programme at George Mason University, evolving from a local event into a symbol of larger regional conflicts, some of which with international implications -- primarily the Iran-U.S. stand-off. "The end result is what we witness today, which is a zero-sum game, in which each party feels that any loss or any gain or any gain on the part of the opposition is loss on its part", said Haddad. The sharply divided factions have agreed on the election of Army commander Gen. Michel Suleiman as the consensus president, but power-sharing between both coalitions and the shape and nature of the future cabinet remains unresolved.

The opposition demands veto power over future government decisions, a move which the majority has strongly rejected. A parliamentary session to elect a new president was postponed for the sixteenth time on Monday, until Mar. 25. "I presume they want to postpone the elections at least one time for every Lebanese sect, granted we had 18 of them in Lebanon, so we have at least two more to look forward to", said Bassam Haddad. In response, the White House condemned the delay as unacceptable and urged outside forces to stop meddling in the deadlocked political process. Meanwhile, former Lebanese Forces militia leader Samir Geagea

Continued on page 4

-- a senior anti-Syrian political and former warlord -- arrived in Washington during the weekend after receiving an invitation from the George W. Bush administration.

The immediate causes of the current impasse have their roots in November 2006, when Hezbollah decided to pull its ministers from the coalition cabinet and stage, along with controversial Christian general Michel Aoun, a sit-in in the centre of Beirut, calling for the resignation of the incumbent government and a more representative government in which Hezbollah and Aoun -- referred to by Western media as the March 8 Alliance -- would have enough seats to effectively veto government decisions. On the streets of Beirut, there is a palpable fear in the air; sporadic street clashes between supporters or rival camps continue regularly.

The Lebanese military -- in a state of high-alert for nearly three years -- remains overstretched. The appearance of the Destroyer U.S.S. Cole off the coast of Lebanon -- in order to promote stability in the region, according to the U.S. State Department -- appears to have had the converse effect for many Lebanese, worried by the prospect of another military conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, one which could catapult the country into another humanitarian crisis similar to the 2006 war.

Hezbollah's broader goals notwithstanding, Norton described the unlikely alliance between the pro-Syrian Hezbollah leader Hassan Nassrallah and Christian General Michel Aoun as potentially reflecting a step away from the sectarian dependence that defined much of Lebanese politics, before, during, and after the civil war. If you examine Maronite communities and look at people in terms of socio-economic status, what do you find? You find that people of higher social economic status... are more likely to support Michel Aoun than the Lebanese Forces, said Norton.

This suggests that what Aoun is doing is appealing to a group of people who are looking for a rational and responsive and non-corrupt government, because they have the credentials to prosper in a system that is more of a meritocracy than the current system today, he said, adding that one finds a similar base in the burgeoning Shi'a middle class, people who feel very much excluded from the current system, thus giving a strategic coherence to the alliance, as well as a class coherence that should be taken into account. Yet, he warned: "There may be a historical power shift underway but this is not going to happen overnight. This is something that is going to occur over years and decades, but to accelerate this", said Norton, is sheer folly.

'UN Must Respond to Zimbabwe Crackdown'

David Cronin

BRUSSELS, Mar 12 (IPS) - Zimbabwe's crackdown on political dissent may need to be discussed by the United Nations Security Council, a prominent southern African human rights activist declared Mar. 11. Opponents of President Robert Mugabe and his ruling ZANU-PF party have reported large-scale harassment

and intimidation in the tense period leading to elections due later this month. With little prospect of the poll being conducted in a free and fair manner, political activists are calling on international bodies to explore new ways of applying pressure on Mugabe, the octogenarian who has led Zimbabwe ever since winning independence from Britain in 1980. John Stewart, vice-chairman of the Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum, urged the European Union to consider invoking a clause relating to democratic principles in the Cotonou agreement, which underpins the bloc's relations with Africa. The Cotonou Agreement is a treaty between the European Union and the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific states (ACP countries). It was signed in June 2000 in Cotonou, the largest city in Benin in West Africa, by 79 ACP countries and the then 15 member states of the European Union.

In 2002, the EU decided to impose sanctions on Mugabe and his inner circle -- such as freezing their assets and banning them from travelling to Europe -- after initiating a 'political dialogue' under Article 8 of that accord. But Stewart argues that the Union should also study the possibility of invoking Article 9 of Cotonou. This states that democracy should be built on the basis of universally recognised principles and that signatories, including Zimbabwe, should ensure respect for human rights and the rule of law.

According to Stewart, the level of state-approved violence in Zimbabwe is now so serious that the EU's military officials should be addressing it. "I am not advocating sending a Belgian platoon to Mozambique's border with Zimbabwe", he told IPS. "But this is an issue of peace and security. It needs to be talked about."

Stewart, who was visiting Brussels, added that an analysis of the EU on Zimbabwe may lead to the country's situation being discussed by the UN Security Council. A day earlier the EU's foreign ministers issued a statement expressing concern that Zimbabwe's presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled Mar. 29 are at risk of being unfair. The EU has received no invitation to monitor the poll's conduct, the ministers observed.

Although Stewart said he was glad that Zimbabwe remained on the EU's agenda, he argued that the ministers' statement misses the point. It is futile, he suggested, for the EU to call for free and fair elections when there is no question this is going to happen. Those wishing to observe the election have been told they need special permits from the government. Wilbert Mandine, a former magistrate now working for the Zimbabwean branch of the Media Institute for Southern Africa, noted that only one organisation has so far been permitted to monitor the poll. Unless more permits are granted, nearly all of the 11,000 polling stations in the country are not likely to face any scrutiny, he added.

And although Zimbabwe has a law stating that the media should cover election campaigns fairly and impartially, Mandine alleged that television coverage is tilted in favour of the ruling party. At the end of February, the launch of ZANU-PF's manifesto could be seen live on the Zimbabwean Broadcasting Corporation. Yet the opposition Movement for Democratic Change did not receive the same treatment when it formally began its campaign a day later. Takavafina Zhou, president of the Progressive Teachers Union of Zimbabwe, was arrested and tortured when he took part in a 'Save our Education' protest in Harare last month.

Continued on page 5

Labelling Mugabe a crocodile liberator and a grasping kleptocrat, he said: "We were promised paradise in 1980. What we have managed to get is a bullet in the head and a diet of starvation". Zhou accused the regime of operating a policy of systematic torture against teachers for about eight years. As a result the number of teachers has shrunk from 150,000 to 70,000. "Just last year, we lost 25,000 teachers and this year we have lost 8,000", he said. Of those that remain, they are 100 percent mentally resigned, although they physically remain in the classroom. That is a dangerous situation for any profession.

While Zimbabwe used to be known as the breadbasket of Africa, its economy has declined dramatically over the past decade. Inflation has rocketed, unemployment has reached 80 percent of the workforce and 45 percent of the population are undernourished because of food shortages. Maureen Kademaunga, a gender and human rights officer with the Zimbabwe National Students Union,

said demonstrations by students have been brutally attacked. In one instance last month a woman who was nine months pregnant was beaten up. All universities in the country are now closed and are not due to reopen until after the elections. In effect, this has disenfranchised students, particularly those from rural areas who have returned to their families. Zimbabwe only allows people to vote in areas where they are registered, but Kademaunga said that poverty means students often cannot afford to travel.

Dewa Mavhinga, a human rights lawyer, argued that food aid, on which four million Zimbabweans (in a population of 12.5 million) are dependent, is being used as a political weapon. In rural areas, the ZANU-PF has taken charge of food delivery and has been accused of denying vital supplies to those it views as opponents. A spokesman for Zimbabwe's embassy in Brussels said he had taken note of the EU's statement this week, but refused to comment further.

Continued from page 1

enough to demand for change. This has never happened before." The electoral results are a landmark for democratic politics in the country, she added during a telephone interview from Kuala Lumpur. "It opens the space for a two-party system." The significance of the moment was not lost on commentators in the local mainstream media, where government pressure has historically kept a tight lid on dissent. "In the years to come, this election may well be remembered as Malaysia's rite of passage to democracy," wrote Shad Saleem Faruqi in the Internet edition of the Star newspaper. "A maturing electorate saw through all the political rhetoric, the issues of corruption, arrogance of power and price rises."

Even some of the country's regular foreign critics offered a bouquet. "Malaysia's elections this past weekend should be heralded as an important gain for democracy in South-east Asia," remarked Freedom House, the Washington D.C.-based political and civil liberties watchdog, in a statement released Tuesday. "Despite attempts by the ruling coalition to suppress opposition voices by arresting activists and restricting public demonstrations, opposition parties quadrupled the number of seats they hold, gaining the capacity to block government efforts to amend the constitution, as it has done frequently in the past."

In fact, the political realignment in Malaysia deals a blow to an old political order that had defined a regional grouping since its inception, the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN). The five founding countries -- Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand -- had governments that made a strong case for dominant one-party states, where any hint of opposition was crushed. Consequently, ASEAN was the home to strongmen like Indonesian leader Suharto, Philippines president Ferdinand Marcos and authoritarian prime ministers like Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir of Malaysia. The policy of the one-party state was even defended by Lee and Mahathir as a feature of "Asian values," where political and civil liberties had to give way to development and economic progress.

Today, however, Singapore is the only founding member of ASEAN still clinging to the old political order of the strong one-party state. For company in the regional grouping, which has marked 41 years and has expanded to 10, the affluent city-state has communist-ruled countries Vietnam and Laos, military-ruled Burma and the absolute monarchy in Brunei. Cambodia, the other ASEAN member, has more political freedom. Yet the prospect of the political wave that swept through Malaysia being repeated in other ASEAN countries appears remote. Most so in Singapore, the richest and most developed of ASEANs remaining one-party states. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has held on to power since 1959. It holds 82 of the 84 seats in the current parliament, which was elected in 2006. The PAP enjoyed a similar dominance in the last parliament, following the 2001 poll.

"The ruling party sees an opposition party as a threat and it pursues a lot of measures to keep the opposition outside the political spectrum," Chee Soon Juan, leader of the Singapore Democratic Party, said in a telephone interview from the city-state. "It has been done by filing lawsuits against opposition figures, using the internal security act and even banning podcasts and using SMS during election campaigns." Yet he concedes that Malaysia's transformation is "very encouraging" for opposition parties in the region that face autocratic regimes. "There are lessons to be learnt. The opposition parties and activists in Malaysia have been pushing the limits of the government, and they are now enjoying the fruits of their labour."

And for ASEAN to grow up politically, the fear among the majority of the group's countries to embrace a stronger and vocal opposition has to end, says Endy Bayuni, chief editor of The Jakarta Post. "Countries need healthy debates in parliament, which will now happen in Malaysia. It means that the government will have to explain and fight for its policies." The Malaysian polls confirm that people have grown tired of the arguments for the strong one-party state, he explained during a telephone interview from Jakarta. "It may have served governments during the early stages of nation-building but not now. That era is over."

OPINION

Repositioning Family Planning On the Development Agenda

Jyoti Shankar Singh

UNITED NATIONS, March 12-- Family planning is a central component of reproductive health as defined by the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). But the Conference gave reproductive health a broad-based character by linking family planning with the treatment and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, the reduction of maternal mortality and the promotion of maternal health and sexual and reproductive health of both men and women.

Within this comprehensive framework of reproductive health, the ICPD Programme of Action proposes that "all countries should strive to make accessible through the primary health care system, reproductive health to all individuals of appropriate ages as soon as possible and no later than the year 2015."

Subsequent to the ICPD, the goal of universal reproductive health was endorsed by a number of other major international conferences. However, due to political manoeuvring by a small group of countries, the goal of universal reproductive health by 2015 was not included among the goals of the Millennium Declaration adopted by the heads of state and government at their summit at the United Nations in 2000. This situation could only be rectified in 2005 when the MDG+5 Summit agreed to include the reproductive health goal as an additional target to be achieved by 2015.

While the goal of universal reproductive health services, including family planning, is clearly a priority for the international community progress towards implementing this goal at the national level has run into several obstacles and difficulties. First of all, there is the problem of integrating separate services in the area of reproductive health. These include family planning, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases has been traditionally provided in these countries through other parts of the health system and HIV/AIDS related services.

Both the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) take the position now that family planning and HIV/AIDS services should be integrated as far as possible and are urging countries to move in this direction. However, there is resistance to such integration from separately entrenched programme managers and civil servants as well as from many international donors.

Then there are the problems relating to cultural or religious traditions. What kind of sexual or reproductive health information should be provided to adolescents? And further on, what kind of access should adolescents have to contraceptive supplies and services? The international consensus as outlined at Cairo,

on this subject, is in favour of giving adolescents much greater access to information and services than is available in many countries. But how this consensus is interpreted at the country level depends on how a national consensus on this question is developed and civil society organizations should play a major role in building up such a consensus, taking due account of cultural sensitivities.

Abortion is another subject that arouses serious debate and passion. Cairo agreed that abortion is not to be regarded as a method of family planning, but that it is a serious health concern and should be treated as such at the national level. Whether abortion should be legal or not is ultimately a question to be resolved under by laws and regulations under national jurisdiction; and where it is legal, it should be safe. This consensus has held at the international level despite acrimonious debates in several international meetings.

Costs become a paramount consideration when the governments, in partnership with the private sector and the civil society, seek to achieve the goal of providing universal reproductive health services by 2015. Over all, developing countries are allocating increasing large amounts to provision of health services, including family planning; but the total allocations in this sector hide the fact that a few large countries in Asia account for the major part of these allocations; and most of the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa remain woefully short of the resources required to make the ICPD goal a reality.

The problem is further aggravated by the fact that international assistance for the sector presents a very distorted picture compared to what was envisaged at Cairo. Since Cairo, the percentage of international assistance allocated to family planning has gone down from 55 percent to 9 percent. While support for HIV/AIDS services is now running at \$10-12 billion a year, support for family planning, has not grown much; it has in fact remained more or less stagnant.

Similarly, support for maternal health services remains quite low, while the estimates for maternal deaths that can be attributed to pregnancy-related causes have not gone down in 20 years. The basic research, data and population policy analysis programmes also suffer from totally inadequate funding.

Our goal in the immediate future should be to refocus both national and international attention on strengthening political commitment and support for the achievement of the ICPD goal of universal reproductive health services, including family planning, by 2015. The achievement of this goal must be seen as part of the comprehensive efforts to implement the Millennium Development goals.

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