

Alarm, but little action, on population

Sooner or later, governments whose populations are still growing quickly will find themselves exposed to external pressures, on the principle that the world's growth is of general concern.

WHAT follows is automatic writing of a kind. The argument last week (*Nature* 362, 275; 1993) that the problem of nuclear proliferation will eventually have to be dealt with by coercion, whatever infringement of sovereignty that may entail, also applies to population growth. In both cases, the violators of good order — those who make bombs (the Republic of South Africa tipped its hand last week — see page 384) and those who let their populations grow without restraint — are a threat to what are called the global commons. The rest of us will be less secure, or less well-off, if they continue in their wayward courses. The big difference is that the international community seems readier to deal with bomb-makers (witness Iraq) than with those whose populations are growing quickly. But for how much longer?

Not very long. Indeed, coercion of a kind has already begun, but passively. It consists of neglect. Thus many African countries have evidently fallen to the bottom of the priority lists of those who administer official technical assistance, while international corporations do not regard them as places where investments prosper. There are good reasons for these implicit decisions: potentially recipient governments are incompetent, corrupt or overwhelmed by civil strife. But the consequence is that the poor become poorer, that population growth continues unabated and that the populations of such countries provide horrific demonstrations of the Malthusian prediction that populations are intrinsically self-limiting; birth and death rates will be balanced by famine and disease. That is why, every year or so, the rich countries are afflicted by waves of compassion for Ethiopia, Somalia and the Sudan, as the children of the famines appear on television.

Population growth is the starting-point for *Preparing for the Twenty-first Century*, a gloomy tract by Paul Kennedy, the Yale historian (HarperCollins, £20.00). It was also the theme of the UN conference on European population at Geneva last week. But those likely to be coerced by others towards slower population growth do not relish the prospect; otherwise, they would not have fought so hard to keep the topic off last year's survey of environmental problems at Rio de Janeiro. Nor is it clear what form of coercion would be both effective and acceptable. One difficulty is that a moderate degree of prosperity appears to be a necessary (but not a sufficient) condition for population stability. (Others include education and a substantial expectation of life at birth.) The danger in policies, explicit or otherwise, that starve quickly growing countries of financial assistance is that they

are then denied the chance of ever qualifying.

Kennedy points out that Malthus's predictions, aimed as they were at eighteenth-century Britain, could have been fulfilled if it had not been for technology, in the form of the Industrial Revolution. With that, of course, came formal education for all and the emergence of groups of professional people able to exploit existing techniques and to develop new ones. Even so, the British population increased fourfold in a century before its growth became less rapid and, eventually, stable. Most of Africa is a long way away from that state of grace, although other population black-spots, until quite recently South America and South-East Asia for example, have demonstrated that progress towards the classical demographic transition is still possible. Even in India, the fertility rate has fallen by a third in the past two decades.

What, in the circumstances, can be done? The first need is that the nature and magnitude of the problem should be openly acknowledged. It is not so much that the world population of 11 billion some expect by 2050 would be unable to feed itself, but that a seemly transition from here to there will not be smoothly and safely accomplished. The pressure of poor countries on the rich world surrounding them has so far consisted largely of migration, but is it reasonable to expect that growing poverty and growing prosperity can indefinitely and peacefully coexist?

But coercion, in this case, is not easily made effective and acceptable. Seeking to make overseas assistance dependent on demographic statistics would be neither. In any case, economic assistance is needed here and now, but demography changes only slowly. But requiring that recipient governments should commit themselves to externally monitored programmes of mass education and public health would at least create the conditions in which the demographic transition to stability could be approached. If, in return, the rich world agreed that exports from poor countries should be unfettered by trade restraints, there would be a chance that the poor countries would be poor no longer. □

Assessment works

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