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They are just like us

The following reflection was written by Dave Kane, a Maryknoll lay missioner and staff member at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

For a few years during and after college, I helped organize week-long “urban plunges,” when we would take groups of college and high school students to marginalized sections of Spokane and Seattle, Washington. The students would spend their days in homeless shelters, domestic abuse centers, Head Start programs, and on the streets. In the evenings, we would have reflections about what they saw and felt during the day.

Spending time with people they had previously only seen through car windows or on TV had a profound effect on many of the students. Inevitably, one of the young people would say something like, “They are just like us,” usually using those exact words to describe the revelation they had while being and talking with people they had always considered as “the other.” They saw that, instead of being so different, homeless people were just like them, but in a bad situation, reacting in ways similar to what they would do in comparable positions. That concept, that we are all the same, is key to forging sustainable pathways to peace and inclusive global security.

This is a reality that Maryknoll missioners witness around the world. As different as peoples’ cultures or backgrounds may be, we find that we have many more commonalities than differences. We all have the same dreams and aspirations of a happy, peaceful life with our families and loved ones. We all have an innate sense of right and wrong. We all have God working through us in different ways.

Maryknollers see very clearly the wisdom of Lilla Watson’s famous statement to a missioner working in Australia, “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.” It is this recognition of our common humanity, of how our stories our wound so tightly together, that allows us to lose our fear of the other.

The history of the Cosmos, humanity’s shared creation story, shows us that we truly are the same. All humans, as well as all plants and animals, are composed of the same star dust. We are formed from Earth and are transformed back into Earth, ashes to ashes ... We are all completely dependent on Earth for our sustenance and well being.

All humans are slowly realizing: We are all One. By acknowledging this Oneness, we see the futility of war, the irrationality of our fear of the other. It is through the recognition of our innate Oneness with people all over the world and with Earth itself that we will be able to overcome the unnecessary divisions that drive much of international politics and interpersonal relations.

The current controversy over the “mosque at Ground Zero” shows the desperate need for a greater appreciation for the Oneness of humanity. While the proposed building is not a mosque, but a community center, and not at the location of the destroyed World Trade Center, but over two blocks away, the controversy around its construction is fed by fear of the other. What many in the U.S. forget is that far more Muslims than U.S. citizens have been killed by Islamic extremists. The vast majority of Muslims are peaceful people who have the same interest in ending terrorism.

Ironically, the Islamic center being proposed will work to improve Muslim-Western relations, and help to avoid future terrorist attacks. Similar to the urban plunge experience, the center will allow Muslims, Christians, Jews and others to interact with each other and see that for all of our differences, deep down, we are the same people. Hopefully we will be able to overcome the current controversy and allow the construction of a center that can help us all to recognize our common humanity and move us along the path to sustainable peace.
Kenya: Citizens approve new constitution

On August 4, Kenyan voters overwhelmingly approved a new constitution with 68 percent voting “yes” and only 32 percent voting “no.” Peace prevailed throughout the country at voting booths, in previously conflict-ridden districts and in the ensuing days after announcement of the results. The vote was met with jubilation in Nairobi and most places in the country, and the day after the vote was declared a holiday to enable people to celebrate. The following article was written by Maryknoll Father Frank Breen.

This ends a long journey for Kenya, which officially began shortly after President Mwai Kibaki took office in December 2002, but in actuality began with calls for a new constitution during the regime of former President Daniel Arap Moi. Kibaki’s administration put forward a proposed constitution in 2005 that was rejected by the Kenyan populace. The large ethnic groups of western Kenya did not think that that constitution put in place enough measures to ensure equitable sharing of power.

Horrific violence in 2007-08 followed the disputed national election. (So much vote-rigging took place on both sides that there was never certainty about who won that election). An initial power-sharing arrangement established the post of prime minister for Raila Odinga, a Luo, Kenya’s third largest ethnic group, just below the Luhyia. Kibaki is a Kikuyu, Kenya’s largest ethnic group, and of the same ethnicity as Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president. Odinga was given certain powers independent of the president, which brought an end to the violence in February 2008, and assuaged the Luo, at least temporarily. However, all recognized the need for a new constitution, which would enshrine a far more equitable sharing of power and authority over central government resources and reduce the almost omnipotent executive powers of the president.

The new constitution first and foremost abrogates many colonial relics from the 1963 constitution that was foisted by Britain and a few Kenyan leaders on the citizenry without their voice or approval. Among these are the draconian Chief’s Act; the enormous executive powers of the president; the lack of checks and balances; total presidential control of the police, attorney general’s office and judiciary system; the prerogative of the president alone to distribute land; and the ability of the provincial administration, which was responsible solely to the executive branch, to disregard the wishes of the people in the provinces. This was a constitution borrowed from the colonial era, and easily lent itself to dictatorial rule and the establishment of a national security state.

The new constitution sets up an implementation process of introducing new institutions, safeguards for citizens – especially a bill of rights -- checks and balances on presidential power, devolution of authority to 40+ counties that will have true power over the use of funds for local development (the provincial system of governance will be completely abolished), and a smaller more efficient Cabinet made up of professionals chosen not from elected members of Parliament. Parliament, however, will vet and approve of all those nominated by the president to be Cabinet ministers, judges, attorney general (whose term will be limited), and to many civil administration posts. The new constitution sets in place a land commission, which will not only deliberate on distribution of land but also will have the authority to reclaim land that was improperly obtained and other large land-holdings that are not being used in order to resettle those without land or to protect essential natural resources, such as the main water towers of Kenya or communal land owned by the pastoral ethnic groups. Lease-hold land owned by foreign companies or individuals will also be open to re-allocation to Kenya citizens, purportedly to distribute land equitably and overcome landlessness and poverty. There will be an open judicial review of any decisions by the land commission. Implementation of Kenya’s land reform will be one of the thornier matters in the new constitution, so explosive is the issue in Kenya.

Another challenging area of implementation will be devolution to the counties. Some counties will be huge, with over a half million people; others,
small with fewer than 100,000. Presumably, financial resources will be disbursed on a per capita basis and not a set amount for each county. Even so, some of the counties will have to be divided into smaller units. Leaders of the counties will be elected by the local population, which in theory gives citizens control over their county officials. However, corruption and authoritarianism can still emerge even in devolved government, and the central government will have to put in place institutions to monitor use of funds and manner of using authority in the counties. County governance will begin after the national election of 2012.

As the vote neared, the Catholic bishops, based on their perception that a constitutional right to abortion was embedded in the new constitution, recommended a “no” vote. Supporters of the constitution say that the actual wording is not that far-reaching: abortion will be permitted only when the mother’s health is in danger, as determined by a recognized health professional.

Furthermore, they say, Kenya has the highest rate of abortion in the world, between 400,000 and 500,000 abortions every year, in a country with only one-eighth the population of the United States. The causes of abortion are varied and complex, including laws mandating the permanent expulsion of pregnant girls from secondary schools and of pregnant university women from university dormitories, as well as patriarchy, i.e. the control of women’s fertility and household finances by men. The new constitution, in fact, enshrines provisions that will defend women’s rights and promote women’s progress, which could lead to an actual reduction in abortions.

Kenyans themselves are pleased that they could pass such a momentous and forward-looking constitution. The international community should support and join them in monitoring the implementation process, to ensure that it goes in the direction Kenyans want.

Zimbabwe: U.S. policy under review

Significant initiatives in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate intend to shift U.S. policy toward Zimbabwe to recognize the current political and economic realities in the country. On May 4, Senators Feingold (D-WI), Kerry (D-MA) and Isakson (R-GA) introduced the Zimbabwe Transition to Democracy and Economic Recovery Act (S3297) to “update U.S. policy and to provide the necessary direction and flexibility for the United States to proactively push for democracy and economic recovery in Zimbabwe.” On July 30, Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ) introduced the Zimbabwe Renewal Act (HR5971), which was cosponsored by 35 members of Congress and also would bring about a major shift in U.S. Zimbabwe policy.

According to Africa Action, the United States maintains two legal instruments that determine U.S. policy on Zimbabwe: The Zimbabwe Economic and Democracy Recovery Act of 2001 (ZEDERA) and an Executive Order declared by President Bush in 2003 and extended by President Obama until March 2010. ZEDERA effectively imposed economic sanctions on Zimbabwe by prohibiting all key international financial institutions from the “extension ... of any loan, credit, or guarantee to the Government of Zimbabwe,” in addition to barring any “cancellation or reduction of indebtedness owed by the Government of Zimbabwe to the United States or any international financial institution.” These laws were crafted in response to President Mugabe’s government at the height of political abuses and economic collapse in Zimbabwe.

The Zimbabwe Transition to Democracy and Economic Recovery Act opened space for a serious debate about U.S. policy on Zimbabwe. Africa Action strongly supported its intent and urged the U.S. Congress to “take into full consideration a diverse range of opinions” and to promote an inclusive discussion about amendments needed to “fully align the bill with the best interests of the people of Zimbabwe.”

After broad consultation with respected political and civil society leaders in Zimbabwe, as well as with the Zimbabwean diaspora, Africa Action made the following recommendations for improving the legislation:

- Include provision for supporting the reengagement of the Zimbabwean diaspora (about four million people) in reconstruction and democra-
tization. Examples include tax breaks for Zimbabweans who invest in Zimbabwe and support for those who return to Zimbabwe to contribute their skills and training to the reconstruction process.

- Establish an education trust fund to support salary incentives for Zimbabwean educators, particularly in the fields of medicine, engineering and agriculture.
- Create a sustaining fund for Constitutional reform and national healing which would give support to the Organ for National Healing, the Constitutional Parliamentary Committee and the Ministry for Constitutional Affairs, as well as to civil society groups working in these areas.
- Remove restrictions on Zimbabwe’s participation in the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)
- Remove multilateral financial institutions sanctions
- Support a debt audit and cancellation of odious and illegitimate debts
- Remove Zimbabwe from the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) Tier 3 classification which, among other things, prohibits USAID funding for technical assistance.
- Support land reform, agricultural development and food security, including open, democratic, transparent, non-racial land reform and concessional farming inputs support for poor rural farmers.
- Precisely tailor restrictions on U.S. assistance to the government of Zimbabwe
- Expand and improve the delivery of humanitarian/humanitarian plus aid, working with communities to end dependency and build self-sufficiency and with the inclusive government based on its commitment to transparency and accountability.
- Review and strengthen civil society support to further democracy and human rights, ensuring that support is allocated transparently and with the goal of reaching diverse recipients.

The Zimbabwe Renewal Act of 2010, which was introduced more recently, would establish a multi-donor human rights trust fund and support crucial sectors, like health care, education, agriculture, clean water and an emergency vocational work program for youth in Zimbabwe; instruct the Secretary of the Treasury to cancel Zimbabwe’s bilateral debt, and in consultation with the Secretary of State, gather information on the feasibility and advisability of restructuring, rescheduling, or eliminating such debt in the future; and maintain targeted sanctions against individuals who continue to undermine the democratic processes, while reviewing and updating existing sanctions to reflect changing conditions on the ground.

Africa Action believes that both bills are important catalysts to the process of reviewing and realigning U.S. policy with democratic and reconstruction aspirations. The United States needs to be proactive in supporting total illegitimate debt cancellation and in funding Constitutional reform and the national healing process.

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**Africa: Revisiting U.S. military expansion**

On July 20, Gen. William “Kip” Ward, the senior officer of the U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), spoke at the Center for Strategic International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. He emphasized (a) AFRICOM’s “recognized legitimacy” and (b) that AFRICOM is indeed working “for American interests.” The following article was written by Jennifer Schutzman, intern in the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

AFRICOM was launched in 2008 in response to the growing strategic interests of the U.S. on the African continent. Its implementation reorganized all U.S. intervention in Africa, with the Department of Defense given the lead mandate. The 2010 FY budget included $1.4 billion for AFRICOM, while the entire U.S. State Department receives only $53.9 million. This continued emphasis on military involvement over diplomacy puts at risk the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts, the safety of non-military personnel and the value of all diplomatic tools.

During the CSIS panel, Gen. Ward made it clear that AFRICOM is no longer facing questions of legitimacy – “why” its presence is necessary.
Now its leaders are addressing “how” AFRICOM’s strategy will be implemented. Michael Phelan from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee commented that it is “encouraging” that AFRICOM is not seen as a modern form of colonization or a bully seeking to control resources.

However, this declaration of legitimacy is largely exaggerated in that it does not seem to represent African opinion. The AU Monitor reports that “African leaders are against AFRICOM because they think that the command is meant to benefit the United States and not their countries.” In fact, just one of 53 African countries – Liberia – was willing to host the AFRICOM headquarters. To date, the headquarters remains in Stuttgartt, Germany.

Gen. Ward himself declared at the same forum that AFRICOM “is about one thing and it’s about pursuit of American interest. And if anyone thinks that what Kip Ward does, having worn this uniform for 39 years is about anything else than that, then you’re probably smoking something that you ought not be smoking.”

African civil society fears that AFRICOM is a modern-day attempt by a Western power to control African resources. The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) has publicly argued against this military presence. Violation of international law has also come into question. The National Conference of Black Lawyers charges AFRICOM with protecting U.S. interests over respect for the equality of sovereign nations as mandated by the UN Charter.

In fact, only the leaders of AFRICOM themselves have stopped asking “why” the U.S. must have military control over Africa.

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns recently co-signed a letter to Rep. John Tierney (D-MA), thanking him for holding a critical hearing on AFRICOM. Other members of Congress, including Barney Frank (D-MA) and Ron Paul (R-TX), have raised the question of legitimacy in high military spending when reviewing the national debt. (Over 40 percent of the U.S. tax dollars goes towards the military.) During this current economic crisis it is painful to see that approximately two percent goes into jobs and the economy, while millions fund a growing U.S. military presence in Africa.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report in July conveying its lack of confidence in the AFRICOM structure. The GAO reports that “AFRICOM is generally not measuring the long-term effects of its activities to determine whether they fully align with the command’s mission ... specifically, DOD and State have not carried out systematic program monitoring of funds for projects that, among other things train and equip partner nations’ military to conduct counterterrorism operations.” American University’s Prof. Carl LeVan warns that “[t]his is a scandal waiting to happen along any number of scenarios, including possibilities such as failed projects touted as big successes, or the actual example offered by staff at an East African embassy: the choice of location for a well disrupted and destabilized local clan relations.”

In order to support the achievement of sustainable peace in Africa, U.S. policy makers should reverse the dangerous imbalance between military and civilian agencies, prioritize long-term stability over the protection of a narrowly-defined set of national interests, and stop the financing, training, and equipping of non-U.S. militaries.

The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns participates in the recently organized Africa Human Security Working Group (AHSWG) to educate lawmakers about the dangers of this continued Cold War strategy of strengthening militaries in African countries regardless of citizen opinion or the protection of democratic values. According to its mission statement, the AHSWG works “[f]or a U.S. foreign policy that does no harm; that prioritizes civilian leadership, development and diplomacy; and that is grounded in true partnership with the AU, African governments, and civil society.”
Uganda: Pursuing peaceful means

The following article was written by Jennifer Schutzman, intern at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

In mid-July the Commission on Justice and Peace of the Catholic diocese of Dungu-Doruma in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the international nongovernmental organization (NGO) Conciliation Resources sponsored a Diocesan Congress on Peace where religious leaders met with NGOs and civil society representatives from communities affected by violence perpetrated by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The Congress was made up of high-level religious and community leaders, including Archbishop John Baptist Odama of Gulu; Rev. Benoit Kinalegu, president of the diocesan justice and peace commission; and Bishop Richard Domba of Uvira. Participants drafted observations, formulated recommendations to both specific governments and humanitarian agencies, and agreed to an action plan for grassroots implementation.

On May 24 President Obama signed the “Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009” (S.1067/HR 2478): “To support stabilization and lasting peace in northern Uganda and areas affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army through development of a regional strategy to support multilateral efforts to successfully protect civilians and eliminate the threat posed by the Lord’s Resistance Army and to authorize funds for humanitarian relief and reconstruction, reconciliation, and transitional justice, and for other purposes.” The bill provides $40 million for implementation over the course of three years; up to $10 million will be appropriated to the Department of State and foreign operations for humanitarian assistance for areas outside Uganda affected by the LRA (DRC, Sudan, and CAR) in fiscal year 2011, and up to $10 million can be appropriated each fiscal year from 2011 to 2013 towards the assistance for reconciliation and transitional justice in northern Uganda. Within 180 days of the signing, the administration is obligated to produce a strategy of implementation.

With the goal of sustainable peace, affected groups in Uganda, DRC, CAR, and Sudan are asking President Obama to emphasize humanitarian reconstruction over military action. Not only would this be more likely to create pathways for peace and reintegration, but as Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) pointed out in a hearing on May 25, almost 90 percent of the LRA is made up of child soldiers who were themselves kidnapped and brainwashed to fight for LRA leader Joseph Kony. The youth of both the LRA and displaced communities need and deserve hope for a future with respect to human life.

The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative (ARLPI), consisting of Muslim, Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox leaders working collaboratively for peace and development in Northern Uganda, recently initiated a letter to the Obama administration which was signed by organizations working in LRA-affected regions. The letter stated: “Military action has time and time again not only failed to end the conflict but caused it to spread into regions once immune to LRA violence resulting in further suffering of civilians. We therefore strongly implore you to prioritize and creatively explore nonviolent actions to resolving the conflict. We believe this is the only way to bring a lasting solution that will foster healing and reconciliation in a region of the world that longs for and deserves peace. Mr. President, we look forward to continued dialogue with you and your administration. May God guide and grant you and your administration wisdom as you discern how to effectively achieve the mandate of the Lord’s Resistance Army Disarmament and Northern Uganda Recovery Act of 2009 (S.1067/HR 2478).”

The communiqué released by the Dungu Congress includes a concrete action plan for tackling violence in the affected region. It advises that peace initiatives must:

- Communicate with the LRA and give its members incentives to come out of the bush
- Support the creation of retrieval centers for LRA victims and ex-combatants
- Organize and pursue inter-community exchange and dialogues
- Establish without further delay rehabilitation centers
- Take into account the needs and concerns of those undergoing reintegration processes

Community leaders within the relevant affected regions, such as the ARLPI and the Dungu-Doruma diocese’s Commission on Justice and Peace are advising outsiders what they want and need for peace. Now they must be heard.
Africa: New migrant rights’ group created

The Aug. 6 issue of AfricaFocus Bulletin included a report by Gerald Lenoir, executive director of the Black Alliance for Just Immigration (www.blackalliance.org) and Nunu Kidane, director of Priority Africa Network (www.priorityafrica.org) on the inaugural gathering of the Pan African Network in Defense of Migrant Rights, hosted in Mali by the Institute for the Research and Promotion of Alternative Development (IRPAD) and funded by Open Society Institute, West Africa (OSIWA).

In 2006, at an international conference on migration in Brussels, a small group of activists from various African countries gathered to compare experiences and share stories about migration within and out of Africa. Two years ago, at a similar conference in Manila, a larger group of African civil society members gathered to affirm a similar commitment and hold the first meeting focused on African migrants’ rights.

[In late July, another meeting was held in Bamako, Mali where representatives from over 40 organizations from Africa as well as allies from Europe and the U.S. gathered to establish the Pan African Network in Defense of Migrants’ Rights ...]

One of the key missions of the Network is to link the discourse on the effects of globalization in Africa to the current reality of migration and displacement. The first Africa-focused and coordinated migration network will work to bring to international forums the voices and challenges of migration in and out of Africa and increase the visibility of the expulsions, exploitation and abuses that are currently ongoing in Africa, Europe and the U.S.

One issue discussed at the meeting was the current bilateral agreements between European and African governments to collaborate in the expulsion of African migrants. In essence, a country in Africa - for example Nigeria or Cameroon - sign[s] an accord with France, to deport all the individuals, back to the poverty and persecution they fled from in the first place. In exchange, the African country receives “development aid,” compensation which never reaches those most in need, especially not the migrants. These agreements are never transparent and are often times in violation of human rights conventions.

The single exception to this criminal policy of bilateral agreement is Mali which has, thus far, not signed an agreement to accept expelled Malians from Europe. The holding of the first Network gathering of African migrant rights representatives is therefore very fitting.

If there is a single country in Africa with the highest number of incidents of repression, it is Libya. In the least known bilateral agreement (also never made public), Libya and Italy signed an accord to prevent and return migrants off of the coast of Libya and across the Mediterranean.

The most recent demonstration of this abuse is Libya’s detention and expected deportation of some 245 Eritreans to a nation known for the imprisonment, torture and death of its citizenry. These refugees are currently fighting for their lives and asking for international support...

[According to Human Rights Watch, “Increasing numbers of Eritreans are fleeing the indefinite national military service imposed by the Eritrean government and pervasive arbitrary detention and torture. Eritrea routinely imprisons individuals caught trying to flee the country and has ‘shoot to kill’ orders for anyone crossing the border without permission. If the government identifies someone who has successfully crossed into Ethiopia or Sudan, it subjects their family members to large fines and sometimes imprisonment. On April 26, 2009, Libya’s justice minister, Mustafa Abd al-Jalil, told Human Rights Watch that Libya would not deport Eritreans or Somalis, in line with Libya’s 1969 Constitutional Proclamation, which says that ‘the extradition of political refugees is prohibited,’ as well as Law 20 of 1991, which says that ‘the Jamahiriya [Republic] supports the oppressed and ... should not abandon the refugees and their protection.’ In September 2009, Human Rights Watch released a report, ‘Pushed Back, Pushed Around,’ which documented frequent abuses of migrants while in detention in Libya, as well as the general practice of detaining migrants for indefinite periods of time. Libya has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol and has no asylum law or procedures. There is no formal mechanism for individuals seeking protection in Libya. The authorities make no distinction between refugees, asylum seekers, and other migrants. Libya has, however, ratified the African Refugee Convention.”]
Other participants in the historic gathering and formation of the [Pan African Network in Defense of Migrant Rights] ... were members of a deported group of Malians who had organized themselves into a strong grassroots advocacy front, AME (Association Malienne des Expulsés). Similar organizations all over Africa are setting new trends of mobilization of those who have been the primary victims of the most harmful policies. Over the coming months, the Network will ensure that abuses against migrants will not go unnoticed, unreported or unheard. It will bring unprecedented collaboration from organizations which are doing similar work but have not shared and coordinated their work before....

For more information contact: Nunu Kidane, director, Priority Africa Network, (priorityafrica@yahoo.com, http://www.priorityafrica.org) or Gerald Lenoir, executive director, Black Alliance for Just Immigration (gerald@blackalliance.org, http://www.blackalliance.org.)

Cambodia: Efforts to ban cluster bombs

In Cambodia, much effort by groups such as the Jesuit Service is spent to have the government sign the Convention on Cluster Munitions. Cluster bombs are canisters dropped from an airplane; the bomb opens up to release a cluster of bomblets over a wide area to kill personnel and destroy vehicles. The Cluster Bomb Treaty, created in Dublin in 2008, has 107 signatories, not including the United States. From 1964-73 the U.S. dropped several million tons of cluster bombs in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. In Laos, 30 percent of the bombs dropped by the U.S. did not explode immediately. For years they recorded that every day at least one person was either killed or injured by unexploded ordnance. An estimated 20,000 civilians have been maimed or killed by cluster bombs in the countries affected by the Vietnam war. The following article was written by Ly Sovanna and published in early August on the website of the Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN).

The Cambodian government should sign the Convention on Cluster Munitions as these devices continue to kill people, say participants at an event marking the convention becoming international law.

“I want our world free from cluster bombs,” said Youen Sam En from Kratie province in northeastern Cambodia. “All governments should sign this convention, especially countries that produce” these devices, he said.

Sam En, who lost his arms and eyes in 2004 to a cluster bomblet, was one of hundreds who gathered at the Jesuit Refugee Service, Cambodia center in Siem Reap for the Aug. 2 event.

Participants, who included Buddhist monks, NGO representatives, cluster bomb and landmine victims, were celebrating the convention becoming international law the day before.

The convention prohibits all use, stockpiling, production and transfer of cluster munitions. Cambodia is not among the 108 countries that have signed this convention. Of those that have signed, 38 have ratified it.

The Cambodian government should sign the convention, said Buddhist monk Venerable Loun Sovath.

After decades of civil war, Cambodia still has many landmines and other unexploded ordnance that continue to kill people daily, he said.

The Catholic Church has been very active in the campaign to ban cluster bombs, said Monsignor Enrique Figaredo Alvargonzales, apostolic prefect of Battambang. “I hope Cambodia will sign [the convention] in the future.”

He said the convention becoming international law is “a step toward peace-building.”

Event coordinator Sister Denise Coghlan said she will continue to campaign for Cambodia to sign the convention.

She will do this with the help of the Cambodian Red Cross and also lobby for it at the convention’s First Meeting of States Parties in Vientiane Nov. 8-14, she said.
Bolivia: Difficulty renewing diplomatic ties

In September 2008 Bolivia expelled U.S. ambassador Phillip Goldberg for his alleged involvement with political opposition; the U.S. responded by expelling Bolivian ambassador Gustavo Guzman. Since then, the two countries have had a volatile relationship. In December 2009, after months of negotiations, there were indications that the countries would renew their diplomatic relations by reinstalling ambassadors, perhaps before the end of the year. In early June, Bolivian foreign minister David Choquehuanca announced that “the two sides were 99 percent done with a pact that would allow the exchange of ambassadors.” Yet no ambassador has been reinstated and relations continue at a standstill. The central dividing issue, the “one percent,” is transparency around U.S. assistance to Bolivia.

A few months after cutting diplomatic relations, the two countries began to meet to establish a framework for future relations. The four central aspects of this framework are: developing a mechanism for working out future agreements; shared responsibility for drug trafficking; promoting trade that is beneficial to all economic participants; and developing an outline for transparent financial assistance. According to people involved, it is this last point that is holding up the negotiations.

Lack of transparency was the central reason for which the Bolivian government expelled Goldberg. Bolivian government officials suspected that he had been working with members of the opposition to undermine the administration of President Evo Morales. The alleged use of USAID money to opposition groups was an important part of their decision.

With the history of USAID and National Endowment for Democracy’s involvement in funding groups in Venezuela that participated in the attempted coup against President Hugo Chavez, Bolivian officials have reason for concern over how U.S. aid money is distributed. Documents discovered through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests show that before Morales was elected president, money from both organizations had been channeled to organizations opposed to Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), his political party, and toward altering Bolivian law to favor of those opposed to MAS. USAID has refused to release any documents since the beginning of Morales’ presidency despite numerous FOIA requests.

According to the U.S. embassy, USAID currently spends close to $85 million in rural areas of Bolivia, but refuses to name the recipients of this money despite its being public money. It is this lack of transparency and history of funding opposition groups that concerns President Morales. “If USAID continues working in this way,” he said in early June, “I will not hesitate to expel them because we have dignity and sovereignty, and we are not going to allow any interference.”

As Andean Information Network’s Kathryn Ledeber has shown, the U.S. and Bolivia have both ratified two important international agreements that provide clear guidance on financial assistance protocol: the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005) and the Accra Agenda for Action (2008). Both of these guidelines recommend that donors should not support or fund separate initiatives that could undermine the partner nation; donors and recipients should reach consensus on who will carry out and monitor development initiatives. The Accra Agenda counsels that donors’ support for capacity development will be demand-driven and designed to support country ownership. To this end, developing countries and donors will i) jointly select and manage technical cooperation, and ii) promote the provision of technical cooperation by local and regional resources. As Ledeber states, “Continuing to insist on unilateral determination of development initiatives and granting predetermined project implementation units to private contractors – often U.S. based – violates the terms of the Paris Declaration and Accra Agenda and impedes collaboration with other international donors.”

The decision by President Obama to nominate Mark Feierstein to the position of Assistant Administrator for Latin America and the Caribbean at USAID has not helped the negotiations with Bolivia. Feierstein worked on the campaign to elect Gonzalo Sanchez de Lozada (“Goni”), the former Bolivian president who fled the country after a massacre in 2003 in order to avoid possibly being prosecuted for his involvement in the massacre. The Morales government has requested that the U.S. extradite Goni so that he can respond to respond to his charges, but has been ignored by the U.S. so far, another impediment in renewing relations with Bolivia.
El Salvador: Mining lawsuit given green light

Pacific Rim, the Canadian mining company that is suing El Salvador through the Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) (see March-April 2010 NewsNotes), won its first victory when the International Center for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) in Washington, D.C. denied the Salvadoran government’s request to dismiss the case. The lawsuit is being watched by many as it will set an important precedent that could influence at least 32 similar lawsuits over oil, mining and gas that the ICSID currently is considering.

The Salvadoran government argued that Pacific Rim did not have a right to a mining concession, that it treated Pacific Rim fairly in that it would have denied a Salvadoran company the same allowance, and that the company could not sue through DR-CAFTA because it was arguing the same case under El Salvador’s national investment laws. It also argued that Pacific Rim is a Canadian company and Canada was not a signer of the DR-CAFTA, so the subsidiary that it created in order to portray itself as a U.S. firm is illegitimate. The three judges on the ICSID tribunal denied all of these arguments.

The tribunal will not hear arguments about the ecological effects of the mine such as that a local investigation showed that 60 percent of the population near the mine experience symptoms of weakness, fatigue, lack of appetite, nausea, yellowed skin, rashes and mental confusion. Nor will they hear that the mine would require 10.4 liters of fresh water per second – over 3.2 million liters per year – the amount of water that an average local family consumes in 20 years, this in a country where an estimated 90 percent of fresh water is contaminated. As Manuel Pérez-Rocha of the Institute for Policy Studies writes, “These environmental charges will not likely carry much weight at the ICSID tribunal... The proceedings are based on compliance with the CAFTA-DR investment rules – national treatment, most favored nation, minimum standard of treatment, and compensation for ‘indirect expropriation’ – and not compliance with environmental standards.”

The economic benefits from the mine are not nearly as impressive as portrayed by Pacific Rim. In 2006, all mining in the country was only 0.4 percent of El Salvador’s GDP. According to the corporation’s own estimates, the mine has a projected life of only 6.2 years, during which the Salvadoran government would receive only from two to three percent of gross sales from the mine.

The case is being watched closely by the U.S.-based mining group Commerce Group that has also sued El Salvador for $100 million through the ICSID tribunal system. Besides imposing mammoth costs on El Salvador to defend itself, the case could show other corporations that they can avoid negotiating with governments by using more sympathetic international tribunals to overrule decisions made by those governments. It will also make all countries involved in “free trade” agreements cautious about implementing any laws that may be challenged in these undemocratic courts. It could point toward an ominous future where governments not only will have no way to rein in polluting corporations, but could also lose millions of dollars in frivolous lawsuits from these same companies.

As Vidalina Morales, a member of the National Roundtable on Mining in El Salvador, has put it: “Pacific Rim has assailed our country, breaching environmental requirements, undermining laws, provoking environmental damage, economic losses, social conflict and corruption, and it should be judged for that. But the roles have been inverted, and it is the company that sues the country and the perpetrator who sues the victim.”

Faith in action:

Send a message to Catherine McLeod-Seltzer, chair of the board of directors for Pacific Rim, and ask her to work to withdraw their lawsuit against El Salvador and to respect the decision of the Salvadoran people and cease all efforts to mine gold in that country. Write to her c/o Pacific Rim Mining Corp., #1050 - 625 Howe Street, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6C 2T6. You can also post a message using Pacific Rim’s website: http://www.pacrim-mining.com/s/ContactUs.asp.
Ecuador: Trust fund to keep oil un-drilled

In early August, Ecuador signed an agreement with the United Nations Development Fund (UNDP) creating a trust fund to support Ecuador’s commitment to keep 20 percent of the country’s oil in the ground and un-drilled. This development could serve as a model for protecting environmental and indigenous habitats while generating revenue. At the same time, some fear that the Ecuadorian government has created a brilliant smokescreen: While it garners praise for its progressive environmental policies it may be planning to exploit oil in other regions of the Ecuadorian Amazon.

Because oil represents 60 percent of Ecuador’s exports, making a decision not to exploit oil in the Ishpingo, Tambococha and Tiputini blocks of Yasuni National Park is quite novel. The Ecuadorian government claims that drilling in this region that is known as the ITT–Yasuni could bring in at least $7 billion at today’s prices. Instead it is seeking contributions from donors for a $3.6 billion trust fund to protect the area.

The ITT–Yasuni initiative represents the first time an arrangement has been made that provides an incentive for a country not to drill oil. At the signing of the agreement UNDP administrator Rebecca Grynspan stated: “We are witnessing the inauguration of new instruments of cooperation, which will act as a basis for supporting other national and international efforts directed toward the search for economies that are in harmony with society, nature and the planet.”

At the international climate negotiations that continued in Bonn, Germany in August, there were some active proposals for rich industrialized countries to pay less-industrialized countries to not exploit their forests, but the idea of paying countries not to develop oil reserves is extremely forward-thinking. The UNDP estimates that leaving this area un-drilled will spare the earth 400 million tons of greenhouse gases while preserving an area rich in biodiversity.

Yasuni National Park is situated where the Amazon, the Andes and the equator meet. Recently it was found to be home to more than 20 threatened mammal species, including jaguars, otters and monkeys, and several hundred bird species. Six hundred and fifty species of tree and shrub lie within a single hectare, representing more than in the entire continent of North America.

This is the first experiment in recognizing the removal of oil from the land and its accompanying environmental destruction and pollutions is actually a loss, not a gain. Ecuador has placed a price on the gift of biodiversity and asked for donors to pay to preserve that gift. So far a few European countries (Germany, Spain, France, Sweden and Switzerland) have shown interest by collectively committing $1.5 billion to the trust fund. Ecuador has been asked by Guatemala and Nigeria for assistance in coming up with similar program for their own countries.

The UNDP will administer the trust fund money to protect 4.8m hectares of land in Ecuador’s other national parks – including the Galapagos Islands – and to develop renewable energy sources and build schools and hospitals for indigenous communities.

While the idea has potential to preserve biodiversity and prevent pollution, this agreement was years in the making. Ecuador’s civil society and the Huarorani (indigenous people of the affected region) kept the idea alive with citizen action, petitions and national and international public opinion campaigns.

While recognizing the importance of this agreement to protect this fragile bio-region, many environmentalists and human rights activists are wary. In the past, contribution pledges have been made and not kept and commitments toward environmental protection have fallen to the wayside. All parties must be held to their word. Oil remains a major source of tension in many Amazonian communities dividing governments and people. Some fear that Ecuadorian President Correa will use the ITT-Yasuni conservation initiative as a smokescreen masking plans to open other areas of the Amazon for oil development that will offset income lost from the ITT–Yasuni closure.
Food security: Churches’ week of action

The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance has declared October 10-17 the churches’ week of action on food. Encompassing the International Day for Rural Women (October 15), World Food Day (October 16) and the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (October 17) the week of action is an excellent opportunity to call for more just, sustainable and equitable production, distribution and consumption of food, while highlighting the critical role that women play as small holder producers.

Not only is food a basic staple which makes life possible, it holds particular meaning for Christians who remember Jesus in the breaking and sharing of bread. Food was also the center of many of the most important lessons of the Old Testament. The people of Israel had been reduced to slavery through a famine. Applying Pharaoh’s commodity rules, Joseph took first their money, then their livestock and ploughs, their land, and finally their freedom.

God used bread (manna) to give the newly freed slaves instructions on how to live out their economic and ecological relationships. Through the gift of manna they were taught to take only what they needed, to keep the gifts of nature circulating and to take one day a week to relinquish their attempts to control their world by honoring the Sabbath.

In contrast, most people in the U.S. and in other industrialized countries find themselves disconnected from their ecological surroundings and their food. Wendell Berry observed: “[T]he passive American consumer, sitting down to a meal of pre-prepared food, confronts inert, anonymous substances that have been processed, dyed, breaded, sauced, gravyed, ground, pulped, strained, blended, prettified, and sanitized beyond resemblance to any part of any creature that ever lived. The products of nature and agriculture have been made, to all appearances, the products of industry. Both eater and eaten are thus in exile from biological reality.”

Since food is so important to Christian understanding, the excessive commodification and industrialization of our food system leads many into spiritual exile. The focus of a week of action on food in many communities could very well be to encounter food as a gift rather than an industrial commodity.

While some struggle with the over-abundance of commodified foods, others suffer hunger and malnutrition. Fifteen percent of the world’s population – almost one in every six people – is chronically hungry, but not because Earth cannot provide sustenance. Rather, the structures and systems for producing, buying, selling and sharing food are profoundly broken. These systems are not unlike the Pharaoh’s systems from which the people of Israel escaped. The week of action can and should focus on rethinking a food system that has separated humans from other creatures in magnificent proportions.

There is an old saying “If you give a man a fish, he will have a single meal. If you teach him how to fish, he will eat all his life.” To that it has been added, “If you teach a woman to fish, everyone eats.” Women play a critical role in food security all over the world. In many parts of the less industrialized world women are responsible for as much as 70 percent of food production. The global food crisis cannot be solved without an approach that has women’s rights and gender equality at its core. Currently women around the globe lag in having access to means of agricultural production, such as farmland or fertilizers, farm labor, credit, education, as well as decision-making authority within the household. Reversing this trend could dramatically improve food security and enhance the lives of families and communities worldwide.

Starting in 2005, the Geneva-based Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance has been organizing churches to join together with other civil society groups in an annual Global Week of Action. Since 2009 the focus of the week has been to promote and encourage the churches involvement in food justice issues.

The resource guide for the week of action gives suggestions for organizing that include a liturgy planning, and an “Agape Meal” to raise awareness about women’s roles in food production and unequal access to land. EAA will also hold a sermon competition on food and gender. Details of the competition as well as letter-writing campaign ideas, exhibitions, videos, bible studies and other suggested resources are all available at the EAA website, www.e-alliance.ch/.
Food security: All our eggs in few baskets?

The recent salmonella scare in the United States, which resulted in 500 million eggs being recalled, underscores the way in which the U.S. food system, which values “free trade,” comparative advantage and idolizes efficiency and specialization, may not be the safest model to be trusted with our daily breakfast. In a recent Food and Water Watch statement, Assistant Director Patty Lovera states that “[t]his egg recall is not a fluke. It’s just the latest example of how the consolidation of food production puts consumers at risk…”

Iowa State University’s Agriculture Marketing Resource Center reports that in 1987, 2,500 producers kept at least 75,000 laying hens compared to today’s 205 producers who supply 95 percent of the eggs eaten in the United States. In business terms this is a remarkable model of efficiency, but the extreme consolidation that has taken place in the egg industry over the past 23 years had led to a startling statistic. Five states (Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania and California) produce half of U.S. eggs. When almost all our eggs come from one of five baskets, it is only a matter of time before something goes wrong that has a negative impact on much of the country.

As we envision creating vibrant, resilient communities in an age faced with climate change and peak oil, we at the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns have worked closely with the U.S. Working Group on the Food Crisis. With coalition partners we are pushing for policy changes that support locally grown food systems that support food sovereignty – the right of peoples and communities to define their own food, agriculture, livestock and fishery systems, and to choose systems that are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. http://usfoodcrisisgroup.org/node/18

In the recent U.S. salmonella outbreak, though the eggs that were contaminated came from one source, they were distributed under a variety of labels, giving consumers the illusion that they were choosing their own brand of eggs. The movement for food sovereignty is rejecting this notion of false choice given to us by corporately organized food systems in favor of having a real choice about what to eat, as well as how and where it is produced. This is a movement focused on “exercising actual democracy” re-democratizing, diversifying and decentralizing the food system. As Elanor Starmer, an organizer for Food and Water Watch in California says, “We can’t buy our way out of the problem if we don’t have any choice about what we buy.”

Food recalls are not new to the United States. In 2009 a peanut recall affected nearly 4,000 products. In 2008, 143 million pounds of ground beef were recalled, including some that had been distributed through the National School Lunch Program. And in 2006, E. coli-contaminated bagged spinach that had sickened hundreds of people in 26 states was recalled. The best way to avoid outbreaks of the current egg recall magnitude is to encourage smaller and regionally dispersed production of our eggs, and other foods.

Trade: “Free trade” agenda moves ahead

Despite campaign promises to review existing trade agreements and to forge a new trade policy before signing or trying to ratify any new agreements, the Obama administration is moving forward with four trade agreements built on the same failed policies of past accords. Both President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have expressed interest in finalizing multi-year negotiations with South Korea, Colombia and Panama while also working to form a Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (TPP) with seven countries in Asia and South America. All of these negotiations are based on the same failed trade model that candidate Obama railed against during his presidential campaign.

The controversial negotiations with Colombia were initiated by President Bush in May 2004 and appeared to end in November 2006 when both countries signed the agreement. Yet while the Colombian congress ratified the agreement in 2007, the U.S. Congress chose not to hold a vote on the agreement due to fear of losing the vote. This agreement
is especially controversial in the U.S. because of Colombia’s terrible human rights record. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, 48 of the 101 union leaders killed around the world in 2009 were killed in Colombia. There have also been a number of news stories linking members of the administration and Congress to paramilitary groups responsible for carrying out a campaign of terror throughout the countryside, including the killing of innocent young men and then dressing them as rebels to show that they are killing insurgents. The U.S. Congress should not ratify the Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) until these serious human rights problems are better addressed by the Colombian government.

Of the three trade agreements that Congress could consider ratifying this year, the Panama trade negotiations could be considered the least controversial, though they are tinged by two particularly controversial aspects: 1) The past president of Panama’s National Assembly (September 2007 – August 2008) is alleged to have been involved in the killing of a U.S. soldier in 1992, and 2) Panama has long been a tax haven and financial paradise used by many wealthy individuals and businesses to avoid paying taxes. After the recent financial crisis, this second point is especially controversial, as the trade agreement could undermine some of the financial reforms that were recently passed and allow Wall Street firms to sue the U.S. government over its public policies.

The U.S.-South Korea FTA is perhaps the most controversial of the non-ratified agreements due to the size and strength of the Korean economy relative to the U.S. After Mexico, it would be the largest trading partner to negotiate a “free trade” agreement. U.S. auto makers are especially concerned about increased competition from Korean car makers and Koreans are particularly concerned about the agreement forcing the importation of U.S. beef that many are concerned contains BSE, or mad cow disease.

While it was President Bush that initiated these three trade negotiations, the TPP could be considered to be president Obama’s first trade initiative. “The president and I intend for the Trans-Pacific Partnership to be our first 21st century trade agreement,” U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk recently stated. Although currently involving just eight countries, the United States hopes the pact will eventually cover all members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, including China.

None of the well-known problems with these types of trade models that candidate Obama complained about have been addressed in any of these agreements. If ratified, they will continue the same decimation of rural sectors, increases in medicine prices, privatization of public services and undermining of democracy that past FTAs have brought to the U.S. and partner countries.

Ironically President Obama says he is promoting these trade agreements as a way to boost jobs in the U.S., though candidate Obama stated that trade agreements like NAFTA “are not working for American workers.” His statement as candidate is closer to the truth. In testimony before the U.S. Trade Representative in March 2009, Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch showed that “...under the current FTA model, U.S. real median wages are still scarcely above 1973 levels, while income inequality has risen to levels not seen since the robber baron era and 4.3 million U.S. manufacturing jobs – one in four of the entire sector – have been lost. The U.S. has become a net importer of food and has seen its total agriculture trade surplus plummet. U.S. export growth to current FTA partners has been 6 percent while export growth to non-FTA partners has been 14.4 percent. The United States had a trade deficit of $200 billion in 2008 with the 14 U.S. FTA partners.”

With the tight Congressional schedule and upcoming elections, it is difficult to know when or if these agreements will come to a vote in Congress, but there is a good chance that they will consider the agreements during the lame duck session of Congress, after the November elections and before the new legislature takes power. Luckily, there is a good bill that has been introduced in both houses of Congress, the TRADE Act, which will reform U.S. trade policy for the better. Until this bill passes, no other FTAs should be ratified.

Faith in action:

Call your senators and ask them to oppose ratification of these trade agreements. If your senator is already a co-sponsor of the TRADE Act, thank him/her; ask for his/her support if he/she is not a co-sponsor.
Climate change: Where do we go from here?

By early August U.S. Senate Majority leader Harry Reid (D-NV) pulled both climate and energy legislation off the Senate agenda knowing that he could not find the filibuster-proof 60 votes to pass this critically important legislation. It seems that climate concerns are taking a back seat to politics – but are policy makers playing Russian roulette with Earth’s future?

In their bids for re-election this fall, congressional members in the Democratic Party will argue that Republicans obstructed the path to passing climate legislation. And Republicans will argue to cash-strapped citizens that they saved them from yet another tax (on energy). But to a growing population honestly concerned about the constant disregard for Earth’s ecological limits, dropping the climate bill now means putting a nationally-embraced effort to combat climate change on hold for possibly several years. What’s particularly troubling is the nearsightedness of this political game. In reality, the looming threats of climate change touch every aspect of life.

In July, the Friends Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) released a policy brief entitled “Global Warming Heats up Global Conflict” outlining the many national security concerns related to a warming planet. The brief begins with the fact that the U.S. military accounts for 80 percent of the U.S. government’s fuel consumption. Given U.S. energy dependence, if the military does nothing to “green” its own operations, it will continually find itself in a complicated cycle of protecting fuel interests by engaging in international relationships that ultimately undermine U.S. security.

According to the FCNL brief, global warming creates situations where people are left with no choice but to migrate. For agricultural communities especially, changing temperatures and weather patterns destroy livelihoods. Throughout the world many conflicts are being caused or exacerbated by competition for limited natural resources like water, minerals and good soil for growing food and for grazing animals.

When looking at the flooding in Pakistan, the Russian heat wave, and the mass of ice the size of Manhattan drifting away from Greenland, scientists are reluctant to point to any one of these events and say that they are a direct result of climate change. But scientists do see these events as part of a pattern consistent with climate theory: Heat trapping greenhouse gases, emitted since the industrial revolution, are warming up the planet. The theory holds that a world warming up due to these gases will feature heavier summer rainstorms, bigger winter snowstorms, more intense droughts and more record-breaking heat waves. Statistics kept by scientists and governments support the climate theory.

Earlier this year when snow was piling up on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, some Congressional climate change skeptics argued that the ice and snow proved that the planet is not undergoing “global warming.” But scientist Kevin Trenberth, head of climate analysis at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado told the New York Times that “[g]lobal warming, ironically, can actually increase the amount of snow you get...But it also means the snow season is shorter.”

By the end of July in Washington, D.C., residents had survived 43 days of temperatures exceeding 90 degrees Fahrenheit. Clearly the inhabitants of Washington, D.C. will not be the first to suffer the worst effects of climate change, but decision makers in Washington do hold the moral responsibility to mitigate the United States’ greenhouse gas emissions to both protect its citizens and to prevent future climate disasters on a global scale. And the first step is to recognize it for what it is, and the peril that doing nothing can bring about.

It was hoped that by December 2010, the administration would have been able to take congressionally approved climate plan to the sixteenth Conference of the Parties (COP) under the United Nations’ Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancún, Mexico. There it is hoped that world leaders will come up with an international climate agreement to regulate greenhouse gas emissions to both protect its citizens and to prevent future climate disasters on a global scale. And the first step is to recognize it for what it is, and the peril that doing nothing can bring about.

It was hoped that by December 2010, the administration would have been able to take congressionally approved climate plan to the sixteenth Conference of the Parties (COP) under the United Nations’ Framework Convention on Climate Change in Cancún, Mexico. There it is hoped that world leaders will come up with an international climate agreement to regulate greenhouse gas emissions. Without U.S. climate legislation, the administration can still negotiate a climate treaty but only if it maintains the Environmental Protection Agency’s power to regulate greenhouse gas emissions under the Clean Air Act; and doing this is no easy matter as there have been various attempts to strip this power within the past year (see July-August 2010 NewsNotes, p. 15).
Ecology: International Year of Biodiversity

One of the monumental achievements of the United Nations is the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), completed 18 years ago during the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. This Convention provides a cooperative forum to ensure that native plants and animals, as well as the interests of Indigenous Peoples, are fully considered as part of the sustainable development of resources.

Unfortunately, as the 2010 report Global Diversity Outlook 3 points out, in spite of the CBD, the present is marked by unprecedented widespread species endangerment and growing species extinction. Extinction rates may be as high as 1,000 times the historical background rate. Habitats such as tropical forests and coral reefs are badly degraded. Climate change and overharvesting are devastating wildlife around the globe. This is due primarily to human activity, particularly unsustainable economic activity. As a result of the complexity of these issues, there are alarming new diseases to contend with as well as rapidly multiplying invasive species.

In mountainous northern Philippines, by the late 1980s, it was often remarked that the fresh smell of pine could no longer be detected. Over-logging emaciated the forest. The water supply dwindled and many birds and flowers were no longer seen. But the rats multiplied and invaded the rice fields. The UN has declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity in order to draw the attention of the general public to situations like this, and, in order to call the explicit attention of heads of state, will dedicate one day of the opening session of the 2010 General Assembly in September to this essential topic. This will be an opportunity to draw the attention of world leaders to the main goals of the International Year of Biodiversity. These goals are:

- Enhance public awareness of the importance of conserving biodiversity and of the underlying threats to biodiversity.
- Raise awareness of the accomplishments to save biodiversity that have already been realized by communities and governments.
- Promote innovative solutions to reduce the threats to biodiversity.
- Encourage individuals, organizations and governments to take immediate steps to halt biodiversity loss.
- Start dialogue between stakeholders for the steps to be taken in the post-2010 period.
- Back in the period leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit, the United States provided vital leadership in negotiating the CBD, which was later signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993. However, the Senate never ratified the Convention, making the U.S. one of only two countries failing to do so. In a 2009 letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Senators John Kerry and Richard Lugar (chair and ranking minority member of the Senate’s Foreign Relations committee), 13 nongovernmental organizations including Defenders of Wildlife, World Wildlife Fund and Friends of the Earth pointed out that the United States stands starkly isolated as a non-party to the Convention. The letter goes on to say:

  “… [T]he goals of the CBD directly support U.S. efforts to alleviate global poverty. About 70 percent of the world’s poor live in rural areas and depend on biodiversity for their well being. More than three billion people depend on marine and coastal resources and 1.6 billion people rely on forests and non-timber forest products for their livelihoods. Ensuring healthy ecosystems is crucial to poverty alleviation and sustainable development.”

Paradoxically, although it has not ratified the Convention, the U.S. has done a great deal to preserve biodiversity over the last decades. If it were to ratify the Convention, it would be better positioned to share its expertise and assume international leadership in preserving diversity on a global scale. The U.S., a richly diverse country on all levels, ought to assume the role of rallying world leaders to fulfill the demands of the Convention.

Because the Convention covers all ecosystems, species, and genetic resources, its implementation requires engaging in the management of complex systems, often having to weigh one good against another. Clearly, the work of preserving the diversity of life is challenging. It demands familiarity with moral and ethical principles that correspond to it in depth and scope. The Convention itself contains guidance regarding biosafety, technological transfer, traditional knowledge, and the Precautionary Principle.

Finally, around the world, billions of people depend on a rich and diverse array of wildlife to survive. By supporting the Convention on Biological Diversity, we are in solidarity with them.
Sustainability: A blueprint for wisdom

As the United Nations has evolved during the past six decades it has responded to an ever increasing string of international needs by continuously creating new areas of expertise. Decade by decade, departments, divisions, councils, agencies, commissions and subsidiary bodies have been established in response to global needs, each with its own mandate. Three examples are the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict, established in 1996; the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, established in 1988; and the World Food Program, established in 1961. Each of these bodies was formed as a response to a new historical situation of international proportions, beyond the capacity of individual governments to address with sufficient depth and scope.

While each UN entity fulfills an important function, the present period calls for cohesion; for the articulation of an idea that binds everything together; for defining the integrating force underpinning all of the UN aspirations and endeavors. Sustainability seems to be the concept that is emerging as corresponding to this charge. Sustainability is the capacity for maintaining life as it is currently known in its great diversity and productivity, in its potential for long-term maintenance of well being. Sustainability applies to the world of human proceedings and to the natural world on which all life depends.

The nemesis of sustainability is the dominant global economic system that tends to overexploit resources and does not account for resource depletion, ultimately diminishing well being for future generations of humanity, unjustly plunging more and more people into poverty, and contributing to the extinction of various species of life. In contrast, sustainability is about bringing justice and balance into human projects for economic and social welfare so that resources are not exploited beyond their capacity for restoring themselves, and hope in and for the future is not betrayed. Environmentalist and entrepreneur Paul Hawken describes it succinctly: “Sustainability is about stabilizing the currently disruptive relationship between earth’s two most complex systems—human culture and the living world.” (Blessed Unrest, Viking, 2007)

In line with this thinking, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon recently created a High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability to address sustainability in a manner that embraces and integrates a wide range of interrelated issues. Following are the words of the Secretary General:

“The members of the panel include some of the world’s leading thinkers and policy makers from government, business and civil society. The panel will address the question of how to lift people out of poverty while respecting and preserving the climate and natural systems that sustain us. … The time for narrow agendas and narrow thinking is over. We need to promote low carbon growth and strengthen our resilience to the impacts of climate change. We need to address the interlinked global challenges of poverty, hunger, water, energy security and sanitation. In short, we need a blueprint for a more livable, prosperous, and sustainable future for all.

“I expect the panel not only to think big, but also to come up with practical answers that address the institutional and financial arrangements that will be needed to put such a new blueprint into practice.

“The Panel will report by the end of 2011, next year, in time to feed into key intergovernmental processes, including the UN Conference on Sustainable Development that will take place in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 and the annual conferences of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.”

In the 2009 Orbis book The Tao of Liberation, authors Mark Hathaway and Leonardo Boff demonstrate a profound understanding of sustainability as an integrative and transformative force. In the book’s prologue they lure the reader into their monumental work with the following paragraph: “We search for wisdom in the hope of finding insights that will enable humanity to move away from perceptions, ideas, habits, and systems that perpetuate injustice and destroy our planet’s capacity to sustain life. We do so in the hope of finding new ways of living that will allow the needs of all people to be equitably met in harmony with the needs and well being of the greater Earth community, and indeed the cosmos itself.”
Corporate accountability: Human trafficking

According to the International Labour Organization, more than 12 million people are victims of forced labor today; 2.45 million of them have been trafficked. Of those trafficked, two-thirds are trafficked for sexual exploitation. Some of the most vulnerable are children, primarily through prostitution and sex tourism. Events like the World Cup in South Africa, which attracted up to 500,000 visitors, have the potential to be accompanied by an increase in human trafficking. While not responsible for this crime, the lodging industry is well positioned to help by taking action to stop the use of hotels for these purposes.

In April 2010, over 300 faith-based organizations and socially responsible investors sent letters to eight companies with hotels in South Africa, asking about actions being taken to combat human trafficking and child sexual exploitation in advance of the World Cup. The letters requested that the hotels 1) create awareness among employees about human trafficking and child sexual exploitation; 2) train staff to be observant of potential victims, and should they observe anything that suggests that sexual exploitation of children may be taking place, make them aware to whom they should report such incidents; 3) build alliances with police, anti-trafficking organizations and child welfare agencies; 4) provide information to hotel guests regarding national laws and penalties imposed for trafficking and the sexual abuse of children; and 5) support organizations that help victims of human trafficking and work with governments to create and strengthen laws.

Six weeks after the letter was sent, only two hotel chains – Accor (brands include Mercure, Motel6, Formule1, Novotel), and Carlson (brands include Radisson, Country Inns & Suites) – had responded. InterContinental sent a response that did not address investors’ concerns. The others - Best Western, Hilton Worldwide, Hyatt Hotels, NH Hoteles, and Starwood Hotels – did not respond to the initial communiqué but answered a query from the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre.

What investors found was that only three hotel companies have a human rights policy that specifically addresses child protections – Starwood (brands include Westin and Sheraton), Accor and Carlson.

Hyatt, Accor, Carlson, and NH Hoteles took action to address child sexual exploitation in South Africa. While NH and Hyatt informed staff about the issue, InterContinental, Best Western, Starwood, and Hilton did not mention taking action in South Africa to increase awareness among staff about human trafficking. Accor and Carlson/Rezidor (Carlson is the majority shareholder of Rezidor, which operates in South Africa) were most active and the only hotels with a systematic approach to address human trafficking with programs and policies on child sexual exploitation.

NH Hoteles, Accor, and Carlson have endorsed an industry-wide Code of Conduct known as The Code. Developed by ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes) Sweden in collaboration with the travel industry, The Code asks tourism providers to pledge to help protect children from sexual exploitation. At this point, 947 companies operating in 37 countries have signed on.

Best Western, Hyatt, and Hilton do not appear to have programs or policies to combat child sexual exploitation.

A report and an analysis by Christian Brothers Investment Services of the hotel responses includes the following recommendations:

* All hotels should have clearly formulated and well-monitored policies and programs to combat child sexual exploitation. It is especially important for hotel chains to have programs in place in advance of major events and meetings that cause an influx of tourism.

* Best Western, Hyatt, Hilton, InterContinental, and Starwood should endorse The Code or implement the elements of The Code.

* Accor’s U.S. chain Motel6 should sign The Code independently, given the lack of leadership among U.S.-based hotel companies on the issue of human trafficking. Carlson is the only major chain to adopt The Code in the U.S.

* Best Western, Hyatt, and Hilton should create and implement human rights policies that protect the rights of children and condemn all forms of exploitation.

Signatories to the investors’ letter will continue their outreach to these and other hotels in order to reduce the likelihood of incidents of child sex tourism occurring in hotels.
Faith in action:
For your next hotel visit, give a letter to the front desk that states your concerns about human trafficking. To download a sample letter, check for a link on the “Women” or “Children” pages in the social justice section of the MOGC website. If you do not have access to the internet, please contact the MOGC for a copy of the letter.

Proposed transaction taxes could bolster aid

Due to the high U.S. deficit and a still-depressed economy, new sources of funding are necessary to help the U.S. respond to climate change; maintain promised levels of response to global health crises, including HIV and AIDS; reduce the deficit; and respond to critical needs at home. As a possible source of revenue, financial speculation taxes (FST) or financial transactions taxes (FTT) -- small (on the order of 0.25 percent) levies on trades of stocks, derivatives, currency and other financial instruments -- are gathering significant attention worldwide.

The United States had a transfer tax from 1914 to 1966. The Revenue Act of 1914 levied a 0.2 percent tax on all sales and transfers of stock. In 1932, Congress more than doubled the tax to help financial recovery and job creation during the Great Depression. The United Kingdom currently levies a similar tax and despite this tax, has the highest volume exchange in Europe.

Several FST/FTT bills have been introduced in the 111th Congress. Examples include: HR 4191 (sponsored by Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-OR), the “Let Wall Street Pay for the Restoration of Main Street Act” and S2927 (sponsored by Sen. Tom Harkin, D-IA), the “Wall Street Fair Share Act,” which would raise revenues for job creation and to reduce the deficit. To ensure that the tax would target speculators and not the average investor or pension funds, the tax would be refunded for tax-favored retirement accounts, education savings accounts, health savings accounts, mutual funds and the first $100,000 of transactions annually that are not already exempted. It is estimated that this tax could raise $150 billion a year.

HR 5783 (Rep. Pete Stark, D-CA), the “Investing in Our Future Act,” would place a tiny levy (0.005 percent) on the untaxed foreign currency exchange market – where one currency is exchanged for another – to raise funds for climate change and health programs in impoverished countries. The bill exempts transactions under $10,000, so it would have very little impact on small-scale traders, middle class investors, and travelers. It also could generate billions of dollars annually.

Forty percent of the revenues generated would go toward United Nations climate funding, to help impoverished countries deal with climate impacts that they did not cause, such as increasingly severe droughts, floods, crop losses and water shortages and grow their economies sustainably. Another 40 percent would go to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and other international health initiatives, and 20 percent to affordable childhood care for working parents in the U.S.

According to the Center for Economic Policy Research, a financial speculation tax adopted by the United States could generate as much as $177 billion per year, based on taxes ranging from 0.01 percent on currency transactions to 0.25 percent on stock trades – and assuming a 50 percent drop in trading volumes.

In their recent report, “Taxing the Wall Street Casino,” the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) notes that in recent years, “[T]echnological advances have made it easier to collect financial speculation taxes. Clearing and settlement services, which handle the processes of confirming terms of trade and making the deals legally binding, have become much more centralized, organized and standardized. This allows for tax collection on all types of financial instruments, even those traded outside formal exchanges (called ‘over-the-counter trades’). The IMF confirmed the administrative feasibility of such taxes in a recent report.”

The discussion about financial transaction/speculation taxes is likely to continue for some time, giving decision-makers and interested citizens opportunities to iron out the details, but the conversation is very timely and will, hopefully, move toward a decision without delay. For additional information, see the IPS report, “Taxing the Wall Street Casino,” which includes a list of excellent resources, available at www.ips-dc.org.
Precautionary Principle: Better safe than sorry

In “Hungry for oil: Feeding America’s expensive habit,” a piece produced for National Public Radio, Jeff Brady writes: “Extracting oil is not as simple as it used to be. The easy-to-find oil is drying up, and companies are taking on more expensive and complicated drilling techniques as a result. … Some environmental and human health concerns possibly associated with [these techniques] may include the potential mishandling of solid toxic waste, potential risks to air quality, potential contamination of ground water, and the unintended migration of gases and hydraulic fracturing chemicals to the surface within a given radius of drilling operations.”

It is precisely due to situations of this nature that member states of the United Nations, UNESCO and the World Commission on the Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST) mandated the elaboration of the Precautionary Principle. (A PDF of the Precautionary Principle is available on the UNESCO website; a link is available on the MOGC website.)

The Precautionary Principle deals with the complex nature of economic activities that would exploit natural resources using technologies that could result in serious and/or irreversible harm. The principle of precaution demands that the natural foundations of life be preserved and that irreversible types of damage be avoided. Damage done to the natural world should be avoided in advance. Precaution must be exercised when conclusively ascertained understanding of harm is not yet available. If conclusive knowledge of harm were available, the Prevention Principle would apply.

“In its most basic form, the Precautionary Principle is a strategy to cope with scientific uncertainties in the assessment and management of risks, It is about the wisdom of action under uncertainty: Look before you leap, better safe than sorry, and many other folkloristic idioms capture some aspects of this wisdom. Precaution means taking action to protect human health and the environment against possible danger of severe damage.” (8)

A predecessor to the Precautionary Principle is the Polluter Pays Principle which requires that the costs of pollution be borne by those who cause the pollution. This principle made its first official appearance in global parlance in 1972. Later, in the 1992 Earth Summit, it was enshrined in Agenda 21 as a principle of sustainable development. Today it is a generally recognized principle of International Environmental Law, even though local compliance is often difficult to enforce.

The Precautionary Principle builds on the same moral foundation for protecting human rights and natural resources. However, it goes beyond computing the consequences of pollution; it faces beforehand the possibility of unpredictable developments because of insufficient scientific knowledge. Its objective is to provide guidance in cases of risk where outcomes and probabilities are not well known. “The unquantified possibility of risk is sufficient to trigger the consideration of the Precautionary Principle.” “Interventions are required before possible harm occurs, or before certainty about such harm can be achieved, that is, a wait-and-see-attitude as a strategy is excluded.” (13)

In 2005, COMEST and UNESCO presented to the member states of the United Nations the following working definition for the Precautionary Principle: When human activities may lead to morally unacceptable harm that is scientifically plausible but uncertain, actions shall be taken to avoid or diminish that harm. Morally unacceptable harm refers to harm to humans or the environment that is: threatening to human life or health, or serious and effectively irreversible, or inequitable to present or future generations, or imposed without adequate consideration of the human rights of those affected. (14)

The document is careful to state what the Precautionary Principle is not. “It is not based on ‘zero risks’ but aims to achieve lower or more acceptable risks or hazards. It is not based on anxiety or emotion, but is a rational decision rule, based in ethics, that aims to use the best of the ‘systems sciences’ of complex processes to make wiser decisions.” (16) It does not provide broad and general judgments; rather, it proceeds on a case-by-case basis and, like all court cases, relies on human judgment.

The Precautionary Principle obviously applies in cases affecting global climate change. It would seem to clearly apply as well in cases with implications for food security, in cases affecting the safety of drinking water, in cases of genetic modification of seed, in cases of deep ocean drilling for oil, as in the Gulf case; and, in many other cases.
Resources

1) Million Minutes for Peace: The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns is proud to partner with the Odyssey Network on this campaign. The goal is to collect one million pledges to pray for peace for one minute at noon on the United Nations International Day of Peace (September 21). Please watch the 60-second video on the MOGC website and then sign your pledge to pray for peace on September 21.

2) Churches Week of Action on Food: Held October 10-17, churches are invited to participate with others around the world in a movement calling for change in the way food is grown, sold, distributed and shared. (See related article on page 14.) The Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (EAA) has produced a resource guide for the Week of Action, which offers action ideas, as well as worship resources, including a liturgy and a prayer card. You can use this guide to help you effectively take part in the 2010 Churches’ Week of Action on Food together with others around the world. Available on the EAA website, www.e-alliance.ch

3) Ecumenical Advocacy Days 2011: Plan now to attend Ecumenical Advocacy Days (EAD) in Washington, D.C., March 25-28, 2011. The theme is “Development, security and economic justice: What’s gender got to do with it?” Women’s contributions are integral to enriching social, religious, and family life. However – in homes and communities, out in fields and marketplaces, along borders and in areas of conflict – violence, poverty, and other social evils keep women from attaining their full potential. Join the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and hundreds of Christians from around the country for a weekend of workshops and information, followed by a visit to Capitol Hill on Monday, March 28. To find more information, check www.advocacydays.org, or contact the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

4) Waiting for Change: This new publication reviews the first year of the Obama administration’s Latin America policy, especially regarding military relationships and aid trends. Barack Obama’s message of change resonated in Latin America, but we’re still waiting for real shifts in policy. This report by the Latin America Working Group (LAWG) Education Fund, Center for International Policy and the Washington Office on Latin America offers a detailed evaluation of what has been modified, and what remains the same, in U.S. policy towards the region. Download the document in PDF format from the LAWG website, http://www.lawg.org/storage/lawg/documents/lawg_waitingforchange_engl.pdf. Also available in Spanish. If you do not have access to the internet, please contact LAWG for a copy: 424 C Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20002; 202-546-7010.

5) JustFaith resources: JustFaith Ministries, which provides programs that transform people and expand their commitment to social ministry, publishes a quarterly newsletter, Voices. Back issues of Voices, covering topics such as justice for Haiti, poverty and women, racism, and immigration, are found on the JustFaith website: http://www.justfaith.org/news/index.html.

6) MOGC listservs: The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns publishes three free email listservs, in addition to NewsNotes: action alerts (covering a variety of issues); Together with Africa, and Middle East Notes. Sign up at our website, www.maryknollogc.org, or email us with your name, city, and state: ogc@maryknoll.org.