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The U.S. elections: Economic justice

In this issue of NewsNotes we continue our reflection on topics of concern in the approaching U.S. elections, looking again at those related to peace and security. Our intent is to evaluate the proposals of political parties and their candidates through a lens held by the communities around the world where Maryknoll missioners live and work, and by the values articulated in the Gospel and in Catholic social teaching.

Maryknoll missioners live on the margins of society, in slums, rural villages, refugee camps, indigenous communities—dynamic places where people work hard not only to survive but to live a life of dignity. According to the 2003 UN Human Development Report, 54 countries are poorer now than they were in 1990. We know that women often carry the greater share of this burden of poverty. 35,000 of the world’s children die every day because of hunger and preventable diseases. In sub-Saharan Africa, impoverishment is exacerbated by the devastation of HIV/AIDS. Vast numbers of people are on the move; many are economic refugees. Not often welcome as they cross borders, they are suspected of being drug traffickers and terrorists. Their journeys are dangerous—many die en route, and if they survive, imprisonment and exploitation are common.

Around the world we have witnessed the disastrous impact on local communities of economic decisions made in distant or disconnected places and see it happening once again as people in increasingly centralized positions of power shape the global economy, placing profit and growth before human and ecological well-being.

Transparency and participation

Most important economic decisions are made by powerful nations; among those, the U.S. takes the lead in designing policies that benefit a wealthy minority. Poor nations and organizations of impoverished people are regularly excluded from a meaningful role in these decisions. People negatively impacted by private sector activities are left without means to hold corporations accountable. A serious commitment to transparency and full participation in decision-making by those affected by economic policy is essential.

Suggested questions for candidates

• How would you ensure U.S. transparency and broad stakeholder participation in economic decision-making?
• Would you support opening all World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO) and other trade related meetings and negotiations to the media and the public?

Corporate accountability

Transnational corporations are major players in the global economy - 51 of the world’s 100 largest economies are corporations. Yet no enforceable corporate codes of conduct exist to hold them accountable for any negative impact of their business practices on the community of life, including human beings. In the United States and around the world, corporations should be obligated to treat workers justly, to pay living wages, to protect the integrity of creation and to respect local culture and laws. The right of the private sector to benefit from patented products or business investments must be subordinated to the right of all people to human security— to access the basic necessities of life, including food, health care and essential medicine, shelter and basic education. It also comes with corresponding responsibilities of transparency and accountability to all stakeholders.

Suggested questions for candidates

• Would you support an enforceable code of conduct for U.S. corporations whether they are doing business in the U.S. or overseas?
• Do you believe transnational corporations should be bound by international human rights law and subject to sanctions in U.S. courts?
• Do you support legislation that would require U.S.-based corporations to report publicly on their environmental, human rights and labor rights practices overseas?
• Do you support the “publish what you pay” campaign, which
would require corporations to disclose aggregate information about tax payments, royalty and license fees and revenue sharing payments with government and public sector entities?

**Debt**

Many impoverished countries carry an overwhelming burden of foreign debt. Often the debt has already been repaid and much of it is illegitimate – from loans to corrupt governments; for failed projects; or to pay for extravagant weapons purchased from creditor country companies. In spite of millennial calls for Jubilee, promises of debt relief toward poverty reduction through the Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC) have not materialized. In fact, the economies of indebted countries have been forced open and restructured, in most cases against the best interests of the poor majority of citizens.

*Suggested questions for candidates*

- Would you support the cancellation of all impoverished country debt to the World Bank and IMF, using the institutions’ own resources?
- In your opinion what would constitute a fair, transparent and impartial international mechanism for resolving illegitimate and overwhelming debt?

**Trade**

As people of faith we believe that international trade should uphold the dignity of the human person and the integrity of creation. Any trade agreement should place sustainable development, personal and ecological well-being at its center. The valuing of goods and services for trade is prejudiced against the poorest countries that often depend on raw materials, basic agricultural products, and human labor for their export earnings. The free market alone cannot be assumed to assign just value to these products. Powerful nations, including the U.S., protect their own markets and subsidize products while forcing more vulnerable countries to eliminate market protections and subsidies for domestic products.

*Suggested question for candidates*

- How would you change U.S. trade-related policy, particularly with regard to subsidies, dumping and market protection?

**HIV/AIDS**

The interpretation of Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) provisions has been a stumbling block to providing lifesaving drugs to people suffering with diseases including HIV/AIDS in epidemic proportions around the globe. Compulsory licensing should enable the production of cheaper generic drugs, making pharmaceuticals more accessible to poor people. But drug companies, afraid of losing profits, have pressured the U.S. Trade Representative to negotiate intellectual property provisions in regional and bilateral trade agreements that are even stricter than legal WTO processes. These will effectively diminish the availability to poor people of essential medicines.

*Suggested questions for candidates*

- Do you support full funding of the U.S. fair share of the United Nations Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria?
- Would you end U.S. support for trade initiatives that undermine access to affordable and generic HIV/AIDS and other lifesaving medications?

**Hunger and food sovereignty**

More than 840 million people in the world are malnourished, 153 million of them under the age of five. In the U.S., 33.6 million people, including almost 13 million children, live in households that experience hunger or the risk of hunger. U.S. policy assumes that increased production will eradicate hunger. In reality, there is enough food in the world. Distribution and lack of access to good, nutritious food often play far greater roles in hunger and malnutrition than does production. The development of large scale, capital intensive export-oriented agriculture can increase production but, at the same time, undercut food self-sufficiency. In preparation for the World Food Summit+5 held in Rome in 2001, “food sovereignty” rather than “food security” was promoted by anti-hunger advocates. They argued that the possibility for countries to determine their own agricultural policy based on the needs of their people and for communities to have access to nutritious food and sustainable livelihoods are essential elements in ending global hunger.

*Suggested questions for candidates*

- What would you do to eliminate hunger in the U.S. and in the world?
- How would you change U.S. foreign policy to allow other countries food sovereignty?

The “integrity of creation” section of the election guide will be published in the September-October NewsNotes. Please visit www.maryknollogc.org for the entire document in Word format, or contact us for a copy. MOGC staff
Burma: Will new constitution bring freedom?

The National Convention that began May 17 in Burma – which is slated to draft a new constitution – seems designed to legitimize the absolute power of the ruling military junta. Burma’s prime minister, Gen. Khin Nyunt, bills the convention as a major step toward national reconciliation. However, opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest since May 2003, warns that language can be used to manipulate people.

“The words ‘people’ and ‘democracy’ are used freely, but not always sincerely,” she says. “They are catchwords to hoodwink the people into placing power in the hands of those who are supposed to use this power in the interests of the people, but who eventually use them in the interests of the ruling classes against the interests of the people.”

Suu Kyi’s political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), captured 81 percent of the vote in May 1990 in national elections called by the government. However, the ruling clique refused to relinquish its power, and Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest.

She enjoyed a respite when the government released her in May 2002. But a year later her political motorcade was attacked near Mandalay, apparently by hundreds of government-backed forces. Suu Kyi and other NLD figures including Vice Chairman U Tin Oo were arrested, ostensibly for their own protection. (See NewsNotes, July-August 2003).

Last August Khin Nyunt announced a seven-step “Road Map” toward national reconciliation. The first step called for a National Convention to draft a new constitution. The prime minister said the conference would resume where an earlier National Convention, called in 1993, ended three years later.

Seventy percent of the more than 700 delegates who convened in 1993 were hand-picked by the junta. Military-controlled committees at the convention laid down six objectives – including a leading role for the military in the nation’s political affairs – as the framework for a new constitution. These objectives were later developed into 104 principles that were to form the basis of the draft document. However, the convention ended in a deadlock.

After Khin Nyunt called for a new National Convention, NLD representatives and other invited delegates – including armed groups that have agreed to ceasefires with the government – set conditions on their participation. These included freedom of speech, the release of Suu Kyi and Tin Oo, and negotiations over the basic principles.

Those conditions were not met, and the convention itself was convened on a military base outside of Rangoon. Further, the junta put forth the same six objectives and 104 principles as in 1993 as non-negotiable. Consequently, the NLD and representatives of ethnic armies such as the Karen National Union (KNU) boycotted the proceedings.

The need for reconciliation is especially evident in Karen State in southeastern Burma, where the KNU has been waging a struggle for self-determination for 55 years. Talks with the government last December and January resulted in a ceasefire, reducing tensions throughout much of the state. However, the situation reportedly varies.

Some villagers report that they are no longer forced to work on building roads and other government infrastructure projects. Nor does the military require them to act as porters and carry heavy armaments as before. However, villagers must still provide troops with milk, rice and chickens, for which no compensation is paid. (See NewsNotes, November-December 2003.)

The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a breakaway faction of the KNU that works with Burmese troops, still acts with impunity. Excluded from the ceasefire talks between the KNU and the government, the DKBA claims it is not bound by the agreement. The breakaway group continues to freely use villagers for road construction.

The KNU is pressed for armaments and funds, encouraging the group to negotiate. However, the government is seeking to improve its international image. This could strengthen the KNU’s position as it seeks a just settlement of issues such as territorial demarcation, return of internally displaced persons, clearance of landmines and release of political prisoners.

Burma is scheduled in 2006 to assume the presidency of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (including Burma, or Myanmar), whose goal is “cooperative peace and shared prosperity.” ASEAN called last August for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, breaking its traditional silence on the internal affairs of member states. If human rights conditions in Burma do not markedly improve by 2006, it might become a question of whether Burma will be seen as a shining example for Southeast Asia, or whether ASEAN will make an example of Burma.

Faith in action:

Write to the Embassy of Myanmar at 2300 S Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20008. Urge that Aung San Suu Kyi, U Tin Oo and other political prisoners be released. Ask that the National Convention be given a free hand to write a constitution that would open participation in the country’s affairs to all citizens, not just a privileged military class. JK
Asia: Anti-American sentiment is rising

The following story, published May 19 by the French news agency Agence France-Presse, is used with permission. It captures highlights of a panel discussion sponsored by The Asia Foundation the day before at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Anti-American sentiment is rising in Asia, in sharp contrast with the dramatic improvement in government-to-government ties between the United States and the region, experts told a forum convened here to gauge America’s role in Asia.

“In fact I would say that anti-American sentiment is growing at a disturbing rate and has never been that bad as it has become today,” former senior South Korean diplomat Kim Kyong-won told the conference in Washington.

He said U.S.-Northeast Asia inter-governmental relations at present had blossomed to “unprecedented” levels, with Washington close to governments in China, South Korea and Japan.

But the story is different if one goes out onto the streets, noted Kim, a former envoy to the United Nations and United States.

“This is rather surprising because there is a huge gap between formal inter-governmental institutions and the popular public man-on-the-street perceptions,” said Kim, now the president of the Seoul Forum for International Affairs, a private group.

He said anti-Americanism in Northeast Asia could have resulted from democratization and the “connection” between rising nationalism and democracy.

In South Asia, the United States is equally unpopular with the masses.

“For the first time in 50 years, relations between the U.S. and all the countries in the region, notably India and Pakistan, have been good and yet, paradoxically, the U.S. has never been more unpopular than it is today,” said Farooq Sobhan, a retired senior diplomat from Bangladesh.

Sobhan said the U.S. invasion of Iraq, its policy in the Middle East and the recent Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal involving American soldiers contributed “to this strong, growing hostility towards the United States.”

“The fact that the United States opted to go to war without a second UN resolution did have a profound effect on the region, which is one reason why there are no South Asian troops in Iraq today,” said Sobhan, the president of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, an independent think tank.

Tommy Koh, Singapore’s ambassador-at-large, told the forum that Southeast Asian governments perceived the United States as a “benign superpower” although “I do worry that there is growing disconnect between the favorable attitude of the governments and the less favorable attitude of the people.”

The three experts had led workshop discussions among policymakers and scholars in their respective regions on “America’s role in Asia: Perspectives from Asia” and presented their findings with their comments Tuesday at the forum organized by the Asia Foundation.

The San Francisco-based foundation is a non-governmental organization which supports programs in Asia that help improve governance and law, economic reform and development, women’s participation and international relations.

Kim warned the growth of anti-American sentiment was a “serious matter.”

“If you try to be a leader in the context in which the people disapproved of what you are doing, you are bound to be ineffective and bound to pay a much extra cost to achieve what you set out to achieve,” he said.

Kim advised the United States, the only remaining superpower after the breakup of the Soviet Union, to “lead well” and “gain a philosophical understanding of and empathy for the people of the changing countries” in Asia.

Sobhan suggested the United States develop a long term strategy in its relations with South Asia based on a comprehensive approach rather than focused on security.

“Critical to this exercise is that we need to be approached in a more inclusive manner,” he said. “The U.S. propensity towards unilateral action, to put it bluntly, is deeply resented in South Asia,” he added.

Sobhan called for greater interaction between the United States and Asia.

Koh said Southeast Asia wanted the United States “to show us a little more love and respect.”

“The Chinese are courting us with love and respect, the Japanese are courting us with love, respect and money and the Indians are courting us with love, respect and history,” he said.

Koh proposed that the U.S. and Southeast Asia hold a summit, emulating the region’s annual summits with China, Japan, South Korea and India. JK
N Korea: Aid helps patients, political relations

Maryknoll Fathers Jerry Hammond and Phil Mares were among a five-member delegation of the EugeneBell Foundation that visited North Korea from May 11 to 25. EugeneBell is a U.S. nonprofit organization that provides humanitarian aid to North Korea. The group visited 23 hospitals and long-term tuberculosis (TB) care centers helped by the foundation.

The effect of humanitarian aid in North Korea seems to illustrate the wisdom of the proverb, “A soft word turns aside wrath.” For example, medicine and diagnostic equipment provided through the EugeneBell Foundation to fight tuberculosis in North Korea is helping to warm relations between the Hermit Kingdom and South Korea. The U.S. should perhaps consider softening its stance toward North Korea and collaborating more widely with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help foster a similar thaw in relations.

Tuberculosis is the most serious health threat facing North Korea. EugeneBell, founded by Dr. Stephen W. Linton in 1995, estimates that it helps treat more than one-third of North Korea’s TB outpatients. It provides assistance to 60 out of 80 North Korea hospitals and tuberculosis treatment facilities.

After the group’s visit, Hammond said he was gratified at North Korea’s open acknowledgment that much of the support provided through EugeneBell comes from the government of South Korea – and from Koreans living in South Korea or overseas. He cited that openness as a positive sign “as the peninsula moves toward reconciliation and reunification.”

Meanwhile, the official U.S. approach to North Korea seems to employ a carrot-and-stick approach. The U.S. has provided considerable humanitarian aid, especially food, as it pushes the regime to accept the concept of broad-based human rights. Critics of this policy say humanitarian aid should be completely de-politicized, and they point to the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 (HR 4011) as a case in point.

The legislation, which has 28 co-sponsors, charges the North Korea regime with serious human rights violations: suppressing religious freedom, resorting to slave prison labor, keeping 200,000 political prisoners. One of the stated purposes of the bill is “to promote progress toward the peaceful re-unification of the Korean peninsula under a democratic system of government.” Critics say North Korea fears that the larger U.S. interest is the overthrow of the regime in Pyongyang rather than the implementation of human rights in the country.

Such suspicions could be further bolstered by public statements like that of Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) in a Washington Post op-ed of July 17, 2003. He urged the resettlement of North Korean refugees (also a major focus of the North Korean Human Rights Act) by the U.S. and its allies. “If this sparks a greater flow of North Koreans from their gulag-like country, some would argue, that could help keep pressure on North Korea or even hasten the fall of the Pyongyang regime, much as the flight of East Germans in 1989 helped undermine the Communist system there,” Lugar wrote.

Linton, who has visited North Korea more than 60 times since 1979, says the situation has improved slightly since 1997, when he witnessed hundreds of internally displaced North Koreans wandering the countryside in a desperate search for food. He credits food aid from the U.S. and other countries for helping to save and improve the lives of average North Koreans.

The North Korean Human Rights Act acknowledges that the U.S. has provided more than two million tons of food aid to North Korea since 1995, primarily through the World Food Program (WFP). The WFP has warned that 6.5 million North Koreans remain at risk this year for lack of food. However, Lugar wrote that donor nations were weary of North Korea’s refusal to allow full monitoring of food distribution and consequently fell short of meeting WFP’s full request for food. Even the U.S. pledge was down from a year earlier.

Critics of U.S. policy toward North Korea argue that food is a human right and is a precondition for other human rights. U.S. thinking might be slowly coming around to this view. Last October two staff members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported on a visit to North Korea. They praised humanitarian efforts like those of EugeneBell for helping to allay North Korea suspicions about U.S. intentions, “thereby contributing to an overall political environment conducive to resolution of sensitive security issues.”

They concluded that the U.S. should consider funneling some of its food aid through non-governmental organizations, “some of which have been able to achieve strong monitoring capability for their humanitarian relief.” They also said the U.S. should help NGOs reach out to North Korea in other areas such as rural energy development, agriculture and public health.

Faith in action:

Write to your members of Congress and ask them to support positive initiatives toward North Korea. Urge that humanitarian aid continue. Recommend that the U.S. consider lifting sanctions against North Korea, and that the U.S. dialogue with Pyongyang without calling for a change of regime. JK
Bangladesh: Workers seek paid maternity leave

Labor organizations in Bangladesh, acting on behalf of women garment workers, have launched a letter-writing campaign directed at U.S. firms whose clothing is made in Bangladesh. The appeal asks the companies to sign a pledge to grant the women three months’ paid maternity leave as provided for by law.

By mid-June, a month into the campaign, 17 firms had signed the pledge, including Eddie Bauer, Gap and Levi Strauss.

The garment workers earn as little as eight cents an hour, while the top wage for an experienced sewer is just 18 cents. Labor representatives say benefits for three months’ maternity leave should range between $47.28 and $109.32, but they say the law is often ignored.

One Bangladeshi woman said she found it hard to meet her quota in a garment factory sewing clothes for major U.S. companies, and she wrote a letter requesting a maternity leave with benefits. “When I gave it to the production manager, he looked at it and he tore it up in front of my face, saying that in the factory he was the law,” she said.

“After my child was born, I went back to the factory and was told I could start again, but only as a new worker,” she added. “They told me the factory was working all night, and if I entered I would have to stay straight through to 3 a.m.”

Labor organizers in Bangladesh say that experience is common among the country’s 1.5 million women garment workers. Ninety percent of the country’s garment export factories allegedly violate women’s right to paid maternity leave, but there are only 54 factory inspectors for all of Bangladesh.

Spearheading the campaign are the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF) and the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) – assisted by the National Labor Committee, a nonprofit organization in New York that defends human and worker rights worldwide.

“There is not one single union functioning with a contract in any of the 3,780 garment export factories in Bangladesh, and in the Export Processing Zones it is still illegal to organize unions,” the NGWF reports. “Under such difficult circumstances, the National Garment Workers Federation continues to do remarkable work, much of it undercover with clandestine organizing committees in scores of factories.”

“The people at the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity understand the garment workers’ reality very well, since they themselves began as child workers in garment factories,” says the BCWS. “When they led one of the first strikes ... to win their legal rights, they were attacked, beaten and fired.”

The manager of a large Bangladeshi garment factory defends himself, saying, “Every week I have someone here telling me that I need more windows, … better sick-pay arrangements, more breaks and so on. Then they tell me, ‘Don’t forget, you are competing against China — you need to keep your prices low.’ I am operating in a cutthroat market. It is not this factory that sets prices and wages, but the companies that buy our products. How am I supposed to pay for better conditions when I’m operating on non-existent profit margins?”

But Oxfam International, a group of NGOs dedicated to fighting poverty and injustice worldwide, sees a contradiction. “Bangladesh is one of the world’s poorest countries. In the eyes of many economists, it is also one of the outstanding success stories of globalization,” it says. “The country has one of the world’s fastest-growing garment industries. Inflows of foreign investment have helped to generate an export boom, creating economic growth and employment in the process.” (See “Rigged Rules and Double Standards,” an Oxfam report on globalized trade and poverty, at www.maketradefair.com.)

Most women workers migrated to Dhaka from poor areas of the country, and most have little education. One-quarter have had none at all. Most of them have no health coverage or even a contract – yet 80 percent fear dismissal if they complain.

“I came to Dhaka with my sister, and we found work in a South Korean company,” says one woman worker. “The work is very hard, but the pay is good – much better than I could earn as a domestic or as a laborer. Conditions are not so good. The supervisor shouts at us women and even pushes us sometimes. And we have no security.”

“Two years ago I was in hospital for ten days, and off work for three months. The company promised me health benefits, but they never paid it,” she explains. “I am in debt now because of health costs. They gave me my job back, but I was sacked after one month when the manager found out that I was pregnant. I didn’t receive any unemployment insurance. Now I have a new job. But I cannot feel secure.”

Faith in action:

Join the campaign on behalf of women garment workers in Bangladesh. Visit the website www.nlclnet.org/campaigns/maternity/ for links to a model letter, the pledge and a list of companies that have not yet signed. Ask the CEOs to guarantee the Bangladeshi women their right to paid maternity leave. JK
Hong Kong: Beijing rejects one person, one vote

China’s “one country, two systems” model apparently has little tolerance for one person, one vote. An annex to the Hong Kong Basic Law (HKBL) – the former British colony’s “mini-constitution” – had indicated that indirect elections might be done away with as early as 2007. Last April, however, Beijing put that notion on hold indefinitely. Meanwhile, at least 300,000 protesters were expected at a march July 1 to demand free elections in the Special Administrative Region (SAR). The following analysis, written by Willy Lam, is used with the permission of the Jamestown Foundation, a private non-profit organization and publisher of the China Brief; www.jamestown.org.

From January 2004 onwards … it has become clear the CCP (Chinese Communist Party)’s all-too-visible hand is behind tough tactics to stifle democratic development in the SAR, and to intimidate liberal politicians and journalists. …

The basic factor behind the radicalization of Beijing’s Hong Kong policy is the party leadership’s perception that pro-democratic elements in the SAR, backed by “hostile foreign forces,” are out to usurp power from loyal, Beijing-appointed officials in the territory. Senior cadres including Jiang Zemin, chairman of the Central Military Commission, have equated the crusade by Hong Kong liberals to seek “one person one vote” with Taiwan’s pro-independence gambit.

Beijing is convinced that pro-democratic elements are scheming to seize control of both the SAR government and the Legislative Council (LegCo). It appears, however, that SAR residents only want democracy, not independence, as former chairman of the Hong Kong Democratic Party (HKDP) Martin Lee reiterated. But for Beijing, a democrats-dominated SAR administration that refuses to toe the CCP line is tantamount to an independent Hong Kong.

Beijing’s fear of losing control came to a head after some 600,000 SAR residents hit the streets last July 1 (2003) to protest against the misrule of CCP-appointed Chief Executive (CE) Tung Chee-Hwa. … Apparently capitalizing on the people’s strong desire to pick Tung’s successor through universal-suffrage elections, pro-democratic parties such as the HKDP and the Frontier won a landslide victory in the November District Board polls on the platform of faster political reforms. …

It was, however, mainly at the urging of ex-president Jiang that Beijing plotted a counter-attack. After all, Jiang, who appointed Tung as CE in both 1997 and 2002, was anxious to counter criticism within the CCP that he was responsible for “losing Hong Kong.” …

First came the great patriotism debate earlier this year, when senior cadres resurrected late patriarch Deng Xiaoping’s instructions that only “patriots” – meaning politicians or businessmen subservient to Beijing – could become part of the SAR’s ruling elite. Never mind that this “patriotic” requirement has never been stated in the HKBL, the SAR’s mini-constitution. …

A product of compromise between the then British colonial powers and Beijing, the HKBL contains the clause that the eventual goal of political development in Hong Kong is the popular election of the CE and the legislature. An annex of the HKBL points to the possibility of doing away with the current system of “indirect election” of the CE – via an 800-member “electoral college” consisting of mostly pro-Beijing elements – as early as 2007. The annex indicates that changes in the CE’s electoral mechanism can be made with the endorsement of two-thirds of LegCo members, as well as the approval of the CE and the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress (NPCSC), China’s parliament. Similar provisions for revising the electoral methods for picking LegCo members in 2008 are spelled out in another annex.

In April of this year, however, the NPCSC unilaterally “interpreted” the HKBL, resulting in the erection of numerous hurdles to changing the electoral procedures for both CE and the LegCo. … At a hastily called NPCSC meeting on April 26, the legislative body flatly pronounced that there would be no universal suffrage polls in Hong Kong for 2007. Nor will the LegCo installed in 2008 be the product of one person, one vote. It will have the same 50:50 proportion of generally elected legislators on the one hand, and “functional constituencies” (FC) – mostly pro-Beijing business and professional organizations – on the other.

In September (2004), 30 legislators will be voted into office via universal suffrage “geographical constituencies,” while another 30 will be returned from functional constituencies (FC). The CLGHKA (Beijing’s Coordinating Leading Group on Hong Kong Affairs) is not too worried about the FCs, which are outfits such as chambers of commerce that usually pick politically correct candidates; democrats can traditionally garner only four or five FC seats, usually from groups such as lawyers and teachers. However, Beijing is anxious that the democrats not be able to grab 25 or more of the 30 LegCo seats from geographical constituencies.

… A big LegCo win by the democrats would mean not only the paralysis of the Tung administration, but would result in the democrats feeling emboldened enough to clamor even more vociferously for democratic rights for the SAR.
Chile, Argentina: Mapuches resist exploitation

The following update on concerns of significance to Mapuche people is taken largely from a new monthly newspaper called AZkintuWE, which informs about Mapuche issues in both Chile and Argentina.

Mapuches in and around Jacobacci in the Patagonia of Argentina are concerned about Project Calcatreu, an exploration in Mapuche territory south of Jacobacci by the transnational Canadian company Minera Aquiline Argentina. Project Calcatreu proposes as one of its methods of exploration the use of cyanide, which is causing fear and uncertainty among area residents, who recently organized a meeting with human rights groups, a biologist, a medical doctor, non-government organizations and others.

Residents still remember the problems created by the Angela Mine which operated between 1976 and 1992 in Cerro Castillo. Recently the director of the mines from Chubut admitted that a large amount of dangerous residuals, primarily cadmium and cyanide, remain outside the Angela mine, and that these are contaminating underground water in Rio Negro. Machines, implements and canisters with chemical compounds were buried more than 100 meters below the surface of the earth in direct contact with ground water, and underground rivers. Four years ago horse meat was found to be contaminated with cadmium which is highly carcinogenic. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) one case of leukemia in 100,000 is the norm. In 2003 there were three cases of leukemia registered in Jacobacci, which has a population of around 7,000.

Ambiental S.A. is the enterprise in charge of doing the environmental impact study in relation to Project Calcatreu. This study is being paid for by the same company which wants to explore the mine.

In the 1990s in the urban area diatomite was mined. Workers weren’t given masks and if the wind changed directions the fine powder landed on the town. Broncho-pulmonary diseases are now common.

With 1,000 of its 7,000 residents out of work, the residents are divided. Some see the mine as a chance for a job. Others are afraid it will ruin the whole region, using up the underground water, drying up wells, contaminating water and land and leading to further desertification of the area.

Mapuches have also demonstrated against the installation of a gold mine in Lipetren, 82 km. from Jacobacci, for fear of its contaminating effects, and against Meridian Gold, a Canadian enterprise which proposed the installation of a mine in Esquel because cyanide was to be used in the leaching process of the open mine.

Meanwhile, in Chile, RALCO, one of a series of dams being built on the Bio-Bio river by the Chilean National Electric Company (ENDESA), will destroy 60 kilometers of the valley and submerge more than 4,000 hectares of some of the richest and most diversified ecosystem of Chile, displacing eight communities of the Pehuenche people, the mountain branch of the Mapuche nation.

On April 20 of this year, ENDESA met with Mapuches to discuss plans for filling the artificial lake of RALCO, which would cause the flooding and destruction of the old cemetery of Pehuenches from the community of Quepuka Ralco. ENDESA had promised to transfer the graves before flooding the area, and set another meeting date for eight days later. However, they began to fill the lake on April 21, using the excuse that they wanted to avoid potential risks to their installations before the rains came.

The Bio-Bio river is one of the most important rivers in Chile and flows into the Pacific Ocean south of the major port city of Concepcion. In the valleys formed by the Bio-Bio, in the foothills of the Andes, exist some of the greatest forest reserves on the planet and a very important ecosystem. Home to the Pehuenche people, this land provides one of the greatest reserves of the Araucaria pine tree, sacred to the Mapuche, which takes almost a thousand years to grow to its full maturity and is essential to the balance of the ecosystem in the Bio-Bio region. The lands are also the sacred burying ground of the Pehuenche. To destroy them is a tragedy for the Pehuenche.

For more information, contact the International Rivers Network at www.irn.org (go to the Latin America link on the left side menu), or at IRN, 1847 Berkeley Way, Berkeley, CA 94703; phone: 510-848-1155. MD
Peru: Lynching in Ilave

A mob of local residents tried Mayor Cirilo Fernando Robles Calimamani for supposedly embezzling public funds and then attacked him and several other aldermen on April 26 in the Peruvian town of Ilave near Lake Titicaca. The mob beat Robles to death and tied his corpse to the post of a bridge he had failed to rebuild during his administration.

Ilave lies 1,300 km southeast of Lima in the department of Puno near Peru’s southeastern border with Bolivia and is home to a population of Aymara-Quechua Indians.

About 15,000 people, mostly Aymara Indians from surrounding villages, had been demanding Robles’ resignation on the grounds that he was corrupt and had failed to deliver on campaign promises.

According to Notisur (May 7, 2004), two major public works projects for which Robles took credit remain incomplete. Robles had said he would use last year’s 8.3 million sol, or US$2.4 million, municipal budget to repair the Puente Viejo bridge, which collapsed in 2000, and to pave the Ilave-Mazocruz highway, which would join the bi-national highway that comes from the border town of Desaguadero and continues to the southern department of Tacna. Neither project is complete.

Even after more than three weeks of protests had gripped Ilave, failure to provide police reinforcements for the town prompted strong criticism of Peru’s Interior Minister Fernando Rospigliosi by the Congress and in the press. Rospigliosi is responsible for internal security in Peru. Others commended Rospigliosi and the Ministry of the Interior for prudent use of their authority, thus avoiding an inevitable massacre. The head of police in the Puno region had warned Robles that they could not assure his life if he were to return to Ilave and advised him to step aside while an audit was done to determine if the charges against him were true.

Puno’s head of regional government, David Jimenez, blames the government for the bloodshed. “The unfulfilled promises of the government have created a deep social conflict which is expressed against the nearest authorities. The situation is not unique to Ilave and in other provinces there is similar discontent.” Although he condemned the violence, Jimenez said the bases of the social protest are just. “It is the great Quechua-Aymara nation, marginalized, ridiculed, tired, that calls upon a deaf, dumb and mute central government,” he said. Nearly half of Peru’s 26 million people are Quechua or Aymara Indians and the overwhelming majority are poor farmers.

The Catholic Prelature of Juli, in which the town of Ilave is situated, spoke out strongly in defense of life and the dignity of the Aymara and Quechua peoples, and in support of all who were victims of moral, psychological, and physical violence during the conflict. The Prelature of Juli also expressed concern about the lack of attention to the situation from regional and national authorities and denounced the media’s distortion of the facts surrounding the tragic events in Ilave. The Prelature called for transparent dialogue among the different sectors involved: rural communities, mayors in small towns, social organizations, churches, and organizations of the state to address the claims of the people of Ilave and install a transitional government in the town. They urged the population be given full participation through existing mechanisms such as Councils of Local Coordination and Participative Budgets.

A Mesa de Dialogo has been established between government officials and representatives from the province of El Collao-Ilave.

Newspapers estimated that Puno lost over 1.5 million soles, or close to a half million U.S. dollars, in tourism revenues when 1,400 tourists cancelled trips to Puno because of the violence.

The violence in Puno further degraded President Alejandro Toledo’s wounded credibility, as coca growers’ protests and various labor strikes hit the capital city in tandem with the grim reports from Puno. Even though Peru has experienced steady economic growth since Toledo’s administration took power, unemployment and poverty have remained prevalent there, particularly in indigenous communities like Ilave. MD
Bolivia: Still a protest in search of a proposal

The year 2003 was by any stretch of the imagination a decisive, self-defining and precarious one for the people and country of Bolivia. The social explosions of February and the upheaval of October set in motion both the anguish of a resilient people too long denied the minimal conditions of a life of dignity and the promise of a hopeful turn by the unexpected changes in the political landscape. While those events remain embedded in the collective memory and the consciousness of the people, new uncertainties and frustrations have surfaced over the past several months that threaten to dash those springtime hopes.

The latter months of last year and the first few of this year gave the government of Carlos Mesa some welcome breathing space. The bankrupt political parties seemingly had lost all credibility… For several months, to the relief of most Bolivians, no major strikes or blockades came in the way of the government's attempt to seek conciliation and build a consensus so that Mesa could begin to construct a national project to fulfil the promises made in his moving speech on October 17 when he was sworn in as president…

Indeed those were heady and hope filled days. Bolivia, rarely the center of focus of international attention, was suddenly thrust into headlines around the world. Analyses of what had happened here, especially the resurgence of indigenous and popular social movements, captured the imagination of the global media in an unprecedented way. People in neighboring countries like Peru looked admiringly on the force of such movements to overturn an unpopular government so identified with the neo-liberal economic policies so favored by Washington and the international lending organizations.

What works in Mesa’s favor more than anything else is the sharp contrast between him and the disdain shown the traditional political parties by the populace. Rather than stabilize after their poor performance late last year their standing as one of the most corrupt entities in public life has declined even further in the eyes of most Bolivians. They have not demonstrated the slightest ability to legislate for the common good. Earlier this month a coalition of members of the major parties of the MNR, Movimiento Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR) and the Nueva Fuerza Revolucionaria (NFR) made a classic blunder in voting to provide immunity for the military to be tried in civil courts and worse yet, passed legislation granting immunity to U.S. citizens accused of crimes committed in the country.

Some in the opposition write Mesa off too easily as having sold out to the interests of neo-liberalism and point to some decisions as indicative of one committed to perpetuating the model set in motion by his predecessor. As much as he tries to distance himself from the policies of his former party the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) he is still saddled with that legacy among his more vocal critics on the political left. By calling for a national referendum on the sale of the country’s vast natural gas reserves scheduled for July 18, he is fulfilling one of his initial promises of last October. How well that referendum is carried out and implemented will largely determine his ability to fulfil the other major promise of calling for a Constitutional Assembly later in the year in the aftermath of the November 2004 municipal elections.

Mesa’s decision to authorize a six month sale of natural gas to Argentina has been interpreted as a last minute attempt to provide needed income for a country reportedly on the brink of economic collapse. For some this is proof that he is all too willing to sell off Bolivia’s resources at any cost. Others interpret this as an astute move to silence other critics who view him as a good willed but inept president. Pending the direction of the July referendum this is merely a short term solution that doesn’t address the deeper issues of how to deal with the country’s chief natural resource…

Photo from October 2003 protest by indigenous peoples of natural gas exportation through Chile
This did not endear them to an ever more skeptical public.

Meanwhile the economic disparities grow even more pronounced. A reliable United Nations study was released a few months back that showed that the gap between the wealthiest Bolivians and the poorest [is huge]. A more shocking and scandalous statistic reveals that the tax base is virtually non-existent. The petroleum companies that earn such high profits pay an infinitesimal amount of taxes on their earnings and flaunt the exemptions they so easily are granted. According to a recent study, taxes on the earnings of the largest petroleum companies amount to less than one percent. Neither do there seem to be any mechanisms to force them to pay their share. Other economic sectors benefit from the same privileges that enhance the status of an oligarchy still very much entrenched in power with vast influence. As long as these situations persist few options for economic development exist.

The consequences of the privatization policies and schemes that were put into place in the 1980s are very much present. Despite the wholesale disapproval of the general public and most economic analysts, notably [including] the architect of the neo-liberal model in Bolivia, the now repentant Jeffrey Sachs, they largely remain in place. Studies that show the failure of the model proliferate but nothing has replaced these failed policies. Unemployment figures remain at an all time high. Reactivation of the economic sector is at a standstill as the country limps along with nothing new or hopeful on the horizon. All of this produces more social discontent and contributes to the lack of confidence.

A frequent scene viewed at any one of the country’s airports is the growing exodus of young people, mostly from the impoverished rural and urban social classes, bound for low paying jobs in Spain and Italy. Remittances from what they earn abroad are a source of economic survival and a strategy to withstand the effects of the chronic economic crisis. This is one of the few alternatives available to people caught in the cycle of poverty and unemployment, but is it the only one?

With all of this in the background it was only a matter of time when we began to witness signs of a repetition of last year’s social upheaval. One act dramatized the situation more than any other. A retired miner, Eustaquio Picachuri, who had spent the last six years trying unsuccessfully to collect his meagre retirement benefits and compensation from the government, blew himself and two policemen up with dynamite strapped to his chest outside the Congress building in La Paz. If this were an isolated act it would attract attention, but it shows the utter desperation that whole social classes find themselves in at the present moment. As summer turns to autumn [in Bolivia], the all too familiar street protests and blockades re-emerge. It’s still too early to tell what they portend, but they include groups like miners, rural and urban school teachers, transportation workers and those from the informal commercial sectors in the larger cities. In early May there were a reported twenty different groups on strike or in protest marches. Included in that figure are the so-called “sandwich” generation of middle aged workers whose benefits have been drastically cut. The miner mentioned above was a member of that generation.

Many in the cities and most especially among the middle classes and intellectuals have repudiated the renewal of strikes and street protests but to little or no avail. A weariness born of futility is written on the faces of people in La Paz in the face of a prospect of more of the same. Many voice their frustration not out of disregard for the legitimacy of the protests and their just claims, but from fears of total anarchy taking over. More and more the refrain of a “protesta sin propuesta” (a “protest without a proposal”) is heard from these sectors who seek a way out of what seems an unending and unsolvable conflict with far reaching implications for the future of Bolivia...

Social upheaval and violence in the neighboring altiplano of Peru, centered in the town of Ilave, situated one and a half hours from the Bolivian border on the Pan American Highway, during the month of April revived the call for the establishment of the nación aymara that has frequently been the clarion call of [Aymara indigenous leader Felipe Quispe (el Mallku)] and the campesino organizations he mobilizes. Throughout the area and in the sprawling Aymara city of El Alto the protests are a way of life and can be ignited at a moment’s notice so explosive are its unmet social demands… Unless these demands are addressed, more outcry for indigenous autonomy and self-determination will befuddle any attempts at nation building...

The Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano captured the imagination and hope of many people inside and outside of Bolivia with his timely essay, _El país que quiere existir_ (translated into English as _Bolivia Exists_) written the same weekend as the change in governments here back in October 2003. Besides giving an insightful historical overview of Bolivia’s checkered history and the successive exploitation of its rich resources by outsiders over the past two centuries, the essay pointed to those signs of hope and heroism in a people battered down but not defeated...

Now more than ever is badly needed the awareness that protest is not enough...
Central American countries respond to gangs

On January 14, Central American presidents then in office signed a treaty against youth gangs, calling them a threat to regional security. Describing the gangs as “one of the elements that destabilize Central America,” Oscar Santamaria, secretary general of the Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana (SICA), said the deal would create “an environment of security throughout the region” (see NotiCen, Nov. 13, 2003 and Feb. 5, 2004).

Two days later in Honduras, Central American and Dominican Republic police chiefs signed a similar document, pledging cooperation, exchange of information, and the creation of a database of delinquents. The database will contain files on specific crimes linked to particular “maras,” as the gangs are called, the migratory movements of individuals assumed to be members, and the sine qua non of police intelligence work, the modus operandi.

Data collected from Central American police sources and quoted in reports say there are 69,145 gang members in the region, organized into 920 gangs. Other sources claim the number of people involved in gangs to be anywhere from 80,000 to 500,000. Notimex news agency puts the number in Honduras alone at around 100,000, with 14,000 in Guatemala, and none in Costa Rica where, according to Jorge Rojas, director of the Organismo de Investigacion Judicial de Costa Rica, the problem does not exist. Police reports from the various countries indicate that in Guatemala, 20 percent of homicides are committed by gang members, and in Honduras and El Salvador the figure rises to 45 percent. The figures are contradictory, unreliable, and highly politicized.

Honduras and El Salvador also have passed controversial “anti-gang” legislation in the past year. In Honduras, the popular law institutionalized the use of violence against youth and justified sweeping arrests. In El Salvador, judges have refused to apply the Ley Antimara, claiming that the police bring cases without evidence and the law as written is unconstitutional. Although the new Salvadoran president, Tony Saca, was elected on a strong “anti-mara” platform, the law has been accused of violating the Convention on the Rights of the Child signed by El Salvador and has therefore not yet been enforced.

Guatemala still does not have an anti-gang law, but there are at least two versions of a bill to that effect floating in the Congress, and administration officials have traveled to El Salvador to study the legislation there. Guatemala’s gang problem appears to have become worse, ironically, because gang members have fled the mounting repression in neighboring countries.

Human rights organizations and other advocacy groups, including the Alliance for Crime Prevention (APREDE) and the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), have called the policies “senseless.” Legislative and police measures taken so far in other countries as in El Salvador violate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by all countries in the region.

Both root causes and possible responses to the phenomenon of gangs are complex and in need of increased attention. The political approach of the current governments does not acknowledge the extreme poverty and lack of alternatives that the youth in the region face. Local and national authorities need to find not only legal, but also socio-political remedies to gang violence and to ensure public safety without abusing the basic human rights of gang members and of uninvolved youth as well.

Of utmost concern to advocates for youth is the profound dehumanization of these young people who are so obviously considered “disposable” by society at large. Maryknoll missioners working closely with gang members in Honduras emphasize the need for rehabilitation, good education, decent work, moral support and opportunities for a dignified future. Instead, draconian laws, exclusion and murder are prevalent. (See following article.) MD

Maryknoll Fr. Tom Goekler (center, white cap) with gang members in Honduras. Photo by MaryBeth Christie, courtesy of Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers.
Honduras: Tragic fire takes lives of prisoners

On May 17, a fire in the El Presidio Prison in San Pedro Sula took the lives of 104 young prisoners, most of them gang members being held without trial. According to authorities, this prison has the capacity for 800 persons but was holding 2,200 at the time of the fire. Maryknoll Father Tom Goekler, who works with active and former gang members, knows several of those who died and many of the injured survivors.

Testimonies of survivors indicate that the guards were directly responsible for the deaths. Prisoners smelled gas long before the fire broke out, yet the gates were not opened until two hours later, and even then the guards fired arms as a warning to the inmates against escaping. Firefighters did not arrive until one hour after being called, although their station is only five minutes from the prison.

This massive immolation of human lives comes just one year after another fire took place on April 5, 2003 in the prison of Porvenir, where 68 inmates died. In the case of the Porvenir fire, former Attorney General Roy Medina accused 51 members of the police and army of being at fault; these individuals continue to hold their jobs. Investigations are now taking place regarding the recent fire and deaths in San Pedro Sula, but human rights activists are concerned that the culture of impunity again will prevail in this Central American nation.

In Honduras, the epidemic of young gangs has taken over political dynamics. The country is in the process of electing a new president and Congress, and political parties expect to gain votes by offering a “strong fist” on the gangs, echoing the current approach of President Ricardo Maduro, who proudly implements his “anti-gang law” as advised by U.S. agencies. The law is inspired by the “zero tolerance” policies of former New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who used preventive detention of thousands of black and Latino youth in an attempt to control crime. The anti-gang law’s prescription of preventive detention explains the overcrowded Honduran prisons, full of human rights abuses and prisoners being held without trial.

Security of civilians is a legitimate concern, yet the epidemic of gangs has deep roots in the historically unequal distribution of national income and in the violence that took place during the civil wars – civil wars that ended under promises and agreements that were not implemented, but rather left poor and frustrated populations as well as an abundant quantity of small arms.

Honduras avoided civil wars, but served as the base for U.S.-related operations and the storing place of arms from neighboring wars. The Honduran economy was worsened by the devastation left by Hurricane Mitch. Currently, gangs are fueled and supported by drug trafficking and, above all, by the young population’s lack of hope in the future. In Honduras, 80 percent of the population lives under poverty.

In the past five years, violence between state forces, drug traffickers, paramilitaries and gangs has taken the lives of 900 Honduran children, which is comparable to more than 45,000 lives in the U.S. Children, some as young as 12 years old, who have been denied basic rights and opportunities, are detained without trial and in deplorable conditions. In reference to this lack of social inversion and in response to the May 17 prison fire massacre, the Catholic bishops of San Pedro Sula, Angel Garachana and Romulo Emiliani, issued a pastoral letter stating, “The ‘there is no money’ argument is invalid. There is enough money for what we want in accordance with certain political priorities. How much money is being spent right now in the political campaign? How much money is lost to corruption?”

Last April, the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), with the support of Maryknoll and in partnership with Honduran organizations, implemented a Seminar on Youth Violence, which aimed to create programs to prevent and address the problem of youth gangs. Participants learned from these youth directly, who explained in their own words that the gangs are their family, under which they feel protected with a sense of direction, dignity and belonging. Maryknoll missioners in San Pedro Sula, like Fr. Tom Goekler, work with these children and youth for their social rehabilitation. Maryknollers also provide training to other groups interested in rehabilitation, not only in Honduras but also in El Salvador and Guatemala.

Faith in action:

Contact President Ricardo Maduro expressing your concern regarding human rights abuses related to the anti-gang law, and request full investigation without impunity in relation with the fire and deaths in the El Presidio Prison of San Pedro Sula. Write to: Lic. Ricardo Maduro, Presidente de la Republica de Honduras, Casa Presidencial, Tegucigalpa, Honduras. (A one-ounce letter from the U.S. to Honduras costs 80 cents.) MR
Nicaragua: Gov't accused of misrepresentation

The Coordinadora Civil in Nicaragua has challenged the government of Nicaragua and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) on the misrepresentation of tax revenue in the 2004 national budget and the resulting increase in allocation of resources to debt repayment at the expense of poverty reduction. An explanation of their rationale follows.

The Highly Indebted Poor Country Initiative (HIPC) was launched by the IMF and the World Bank in 1996 with the stated purpose of reducing unsustainable debt levels of the highly indebted poor countries of the world. Nicaragua is one of the first countries to reach what is called the Completion Point in the HIPC process, a point necessary for significant debt relief. As prerequisites for reaching this point, the Nicaraguan government has been required to comply with a set of IMF and World Bank conditions and structural reforms. As part of this process, government expenditures for essential services were reduced to extremely low levels and the government took steps toward the privatization of crucial sectors, including health, social security and water. These policies did little to ease poverty in Nicaragua and may even have exacerbated it. Nicaragua continues to rank second to Haiti in terms of human poverty in the Western Hemisphere. According to the 2003 Human Development Report compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), 94.5 percent of the total population (4.9 million) subsists on US$2.00 per day.

The international financial institutions promised that relief from the fiscal straightjacket would come when Nicaragua reached the Completion Point, reducing the debt burden and increasing resources available for poverty reduction. However, civil society became acutely concerned about this promise when in 2003 over $100 million in interim debt relief was diverted from poverty reduction to pay off internal debt to bankers - much of which was illicit in origin, in this way contravening the stipulations of the Paris Club Agreements with bilateral creditors. (See May/June 2003 NewsNotes.)

This year the Coordinadora Civil (CC), a coalition representing over 300 organizations, social movements and individuals in Nicaragua, with a goal of strengthening the efforts of citizens to achieve equitable sustainable human development there, identified in its annual national budget analysis a similar pattern of deviation of resources from poverty reduction to the commercial banking system. This diversion of resources in 2004 not only makes the realization of the UN Millennium Goals a truly unrealistic fantasy according to many analysts, but is also highly irregular, violates transparency, and goes against the Nicaraguan Constitution.

Specifically, in February 2004, the CC publicly documented and denounced that:

• on December 9, 2003 the National Assembly of Nicaragua approved the National Budget for 2004, which registers the amount of projected income from taxes as 10,196 billion Cordobas, equal to 14.98 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP);
• this projected figure for tax income is highly incongruent and represents an underreporting of tax revenue in the National Budget; a higher, more accurate figure of 11,350 billion Cordobas, equal to 16.7 percent of the GDP, was registered in the “Memorandum of Social and Economic Policies” addressed to the IMF on December 22, just 13 days later;
• the National Budget was signed into law without proper levels of consultation and review due to a pressing deadline for passage of the budget in order to meet the IMF deadline for reaching the HIPC Completion Point;
• the IMF and the Nicaraguan government committed to a figure for tax revenue which is higher than that which appears in the national budget; a higher, more accurate figure of 11,350 billion Cordobas, equal to 16.7 percent of the GDP, was registered in the “Memorandum of Social and Economic Policies” addressed to the IMF on December 22, just 13 days later;
• the National Budget was signed into law without proper levels of consultation and review due to a pressing deadline for passage of the budget in order to meet the IMF deadline for reaching the HIPC Completion Point;
• the IMF and the Nicaraguan government committed to a figure for tax revenue which is higher than that which appears in the national budget, and to a transfer of resources to the Central Bank which is higher than that which appears in the national budget.

The CC interpreted these findings as a mechanism to hide over 1.153 billion Cordobas in tax revenue, equivalent to 70 percent of the annual budget for the Ministry of Education. The results include an underfunding of basic services such as health, education and transfer of resources to cities, which are based to a large extent on fixed percentages of the national budget.

For additional information contact David Bronkema, Program Coordinator, Latin American and Caribbean Region, American Friends Service Committee at dbronkema@afsc.org.

MD
Dear Monseñor Romero,

On the 24th of March, the anniversary of your martyrdom, the Romero Foundation declared a jubilee year in your honor. We’re going to take this seriously, but not just this year, because for us, the poor, you continue to be a source of much joy and because we can always count on you.

Today we’d like to tell you that we, your beloved ecclesial Christian Base Communities of the Bajo Lempa, had a great experience of Pentecost, the coming of the Spirit of Jesus. You have to hear about this as it will make you so happy.

You recall that in December 2003 we did the Walk for Life which took five days. At that time we wrote you a letter which we took to the Presidential Palace, as we demanded that the levee on our side of the Lempa River be completed. We were welcomed by the riot police, but we read the letter addressed to you in public. Despite everything, we, your beloved poor, continue to suffer from the problem of the non-completion of the levees built since Hurricane Mitch on either side of the lower Lempa River. And we now once again face the threat of the rainy season. Without rights or defenses we are exposed to being flooded and losing everything, again. However, we have clothed ourselves in courage, as you would like. We activated our rural communities and over the course of weeks, distributed among some initial communities the task of filling bags with sand. We called together all our rural communities for a huge work day of May 15.

You should have seen it, Monseñor. More than 1,000 people, big and little, filling sacks, tying sacks, carrying sacks, even across a stream with water knee high, lining them up and stacking the sacks joyfully and with a lot of sweat ... it was very hot. It was freely chosen sweat. We usually sweat from being sick; this time it was amidst our own joy. And what a sense of sisterhood and brotherhood! People come from Carolina del Norte, San Luis de la Reina, Ciudad Barrios (your birthplace), Estanzuelas, San Buenaventura, Ereguyquin, San Agustin, San Ramon in San Salvador ... working alongside our people. Some commented with admiration, “After all, aren’t those the people from the Bajo Lempa?” It seems that other people understand us. And, certainly, Monseñor Romero, we all understand the language of solidarity. What an event! It was Pentecost arriving before the actual date.

We discovered, Monseñor, that what happened on May 15 was like a new Pentecost. We know you would interpret it that way. For this reason, today, the actual feast of Pentecost, we are celebrating the first Pentecost on the levee (On May 30, Pentecost, another 1,000 plus people came to fill another big hole in the levee and to pray and celebrate together!) We communities are gathered together with joy and strength, with the Spirit, you could say. Here we are able to announce once again the Good News of the Realm of God. Here we have felt free to serve.

And we have been strengthened in our faith. We have discovered despite all adversity, it is possible to construct the new “Pueblo de Dios” about which you so liked to dream; this people made up of the poor and their sisters and brothers, about who it can be said, “Look how they love one another.”

Thank you, Monseñor Romero, for making things so clear to us. With you it’s not hard to find Jesus. Thank you for being present at this Pentecost with all of us men, children and women.

On May 15 and 30 and in between, some 30,000 sandbags were filled and stacked. Four huge holes in the levee were filled, bringing added protection to the 500 families who live close to this section of the river. The levee is not finished and it will not be properly built with sandbags. But the danger is lessened for the moment, and the people of God, who recall that the Christian communities were given a public birthing on the first Pentecost, are not allowing the scandal of government inaction to determine their fate and that of the land and animals.
Northern Uganda: 18 years of conflict is enough

For 18 years, the government of Uganda has pursued a military option to bring the conflict in Northern Uganda to an end. At times, the government has offered amnesty to the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) but has simultaneously conducted military campaigns, significantly eroding confidence and trust in a peaceful resolution.

In the continuing conflict, the LRA has inflicted untold suffering—abducting children and mutilating others, even in the internal displacement camps (IDP), where about 960,000 of Northern Uganda’s 1.5 million people live in appalling conditions. The military has failed to adequately protect those it forced into IDPs, where hundreds have been killed since 1995. Recently, the LRA attacked four villages in southern Sudan killing at least 41 people and leaving several hundred homeless (Xinhua News Agency/ReliefWeb, June 10). The rebels struck two camps in Northern Uganda the same night, killing 23 people and wounding 10 more.

These circumstances, the duration of the conflict, and the rebels being substantially constituted of abducted children speak strongly to the need for a peaceful resolution. Yet the Ugandan government continues to threaten and falsely accuse Archbishop John Baptist Odama, chair of the Acholi Religious Peace Initiative, one of the local efforts that need more international support.

Instead of working toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict, the government continues to demonize the rebels through state-controlled media, and, despite its amnesty offer towards the rebels, has now instituted criminal proceedings against the LRA in the International Criminal Court (ICC). (See NewsNotes, March/April 2004.) Those steps, which may be appropriate in the post-conflict resolution phase, constitute obstacles to the peace process and demonstrate a lack of willingness on the part of the government to facilitate or embrace that process. Many people of the north are opposed to the ICC investigation since it is predominantly their own children who compose the LRA, and it is possible that LRA leader Joseph Kony will kill the children as the criminal investigation closes in on him. Against a background of lack of confidence/trust on both sides, it is important to have the international community to pressure the Sudan to stop arming the LRA and the Uganda government to pursue a peaceful resolution more seriously. The U.S. has strong bilateral relations with Uganda and its influence is critical in this respect.

Some members of Parliament, as well as the representative of the European Union, have recommended that northern Uganda be declared a disaster zone. (The EU representative rebutted charges of meddling in Uganda’s internal affairs by pointing out that the EU provides much of the 53 percent of Uganda’s budget supplied by donor nations.) President Yoweri Museveni’s refusal to declare a disaster zone is perceived by the Acholi as further proof that the ruling government does not want to seriously address the situation; it indicates a lack of political will on the part of the government to end the conflict.

The LRA has extended its operations outside of the north to attack IDP camps to the south and east. This has led to conflict with other tribal groups and has prompted some leaders to warn of a tribally-based genocide. The government responded by establishing local defense units or militias. It seems that, for the time being, the more serious danger is the longer-term consequence of arming militias without proper training or direction.

Recently, the U.S. Senate passed the Northern Uganda Crisis Act (which is now before the House of Representatives) which will empower the State Department to make a report on the situation in Northern Uganda. The State Department should consult the Acholi Religious Peace Initiative as it prepares its report on under Section 4 of the Act, and avoid only consulting the Uganda government. The Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative works with both groups and has people on both sides. It is in touch with people on the ground, suffers with them, and can voice their suffering.

**Faith in action:**

Contact your member of Congress. Ask him/her to support the S. 2264, “The Northern Uganda Crisis Response Act.” Also ask that s/he ensures that the U.S. government 1) will push the Sudanese government, through the UN, to end its support to the LRA, and 2) will push the Uganda government to declare Northern Uganda a disaster area and to seriously pursue alternatives that would bring the conflict to a peaceful resolution.
Uganda: Amendment harms peace, economy

The following article is written by Fr. Joseph Isanga, a diocesan priest from Uganda who interned for several weeks with the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns this summer.

Like several African counterparts, there are concerns that Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni will attempt to amend the Constitution so he can run for a third term in 2006, when he is due to step down. Since he is unlikely to win the necessary two-thirds parliamentary majority for this amendment, he has proposed a public referendum. However, a referendum on presidential term limits would be politically and/or, legally unjustifiable, imprudent and wasteful in the poverty-striven country with a checkered history of conflict.

Museveni took power in 1986 after a protracted guerrilla war against the Obote II regime, who came to power by what is believed to have been a rigged election. The new regime promised political stability to the country familiar with conflict and suffering. After ruling Uganda for nearly 10 years, Museveni had a new constitution promulgated in 1995, the constitution he now wants to amend to enable him run for the presidency in 2006.

Article 105(2) of the Ugandan Constitution states that “[a] person shall not be elected under this constitution to hold office for more than two terms as prescribed by this article.” A limit on presidential tenure is important in Africa and has been endorsed by Uganda’s neighbors. In Malawi and Zambia, the attempt to remove term limits was successfully resisted, thanks to regimes that were prepared to listen. For legal, economic and other reasons, the proposed amendment in Uganda ought to be resisted. Article 258(2) of the Constitution says, “This Constitution shall not be amended except by an act of parliament.” It follows that the only legitimate way to amend the Constitution is for parliament to pass an act to that effect.

However, the pro-referendum group, led by none other than Museveni, will hear none of this. For their part they refer to Article 1 of the same constitution and specifically Clause 1, which says, “all power belongs to the people...” and Clause 4 that says “The people shall express their will and consent on who shall govern them and how they shall be governed through regular free and fair elections of their representatives or through referenda.” However, the tendency in respect to Clause 1 has been to concentrate on that first bit and leaves out the rest that says, “... who shall exercise their sovereignty in accordance with this constitution.”

On June 2, 2004, in a Joint Statement to the government of Uganda, the interfaith Uganda Joint Christian Council (UJCC) denounced the proposed constitutional amendment in the following terms: “UJCC is concerned about the proposal to amend article 105(2) of the Constitution on presidential term limit. We are of the view that this move is not justifiable on the following grounds: This article was incorporated in the constitution in light of our past experience of the failure by successive leaders and regimes to hand over power peacefully in accordance with the law. In light of the view stated in the Uganda Constitutional Commission Report Chapter 12 page 332 paragraph 12.91 which states, inter alia, that The disadvantage of indefinite re-election is the danger of personal ambition and using the office of the President to secure re-election to the neglect of more important duties of State’ which is consistent with our experience of human weakness with regard to the tendency to cling to power. Parliament is the only authority mandated under the Constitution to amend article 105(2) of the constitution; Amending article 105 (2) will set a dangerous precedent.”

The referendum — at a cost of 30 billion Uganda shillings — is unnecessary for economic and political reasons as well. For Uganda, a highly indebted poor country ($3.6 billion) and one that depends on foreign donors for over half of its resources, holding a referendum that has no constitutional basis is an intolerable cost to incur. Politically, past experience shows that elections in Uganda are not a reliable means of changing leaders. Term limits are a more secure safeguard. Moreover, the Uganda Electoral Commission, an organ of government, is not a body that is expected to provide credible results of such a referendum.

Uganda has not yet had a peaceful transition of government since independence in 1962. In the north, the government battles the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). The LRA rebellion follows a pattern established since 1962 — the forceful removal of regimes that are reluctant to relinquish political power by peaceful means. There has to be an end to this pattern and this is possible through a strict adherence to the rule of law.

Faith in action:

The U.S. has strong bilateral relations with Uganda and has leverage to prevent the causes of future conflicts and support the rule of law and democratic governance. Make Congress and the State Department aware that you are concerned about Uganda by contacting your representatives and/or senators to be constructively attentive to this aspect of U.S. international relations.
Sudan: Historic peace protocols

Amid shrieks of joy and singing, Sudan’s government and southern rebels signed the Nairobi Declaration on June 5, 2004, launching the final phase of talks to end the civil war. The 21-year conflict, one of the longest wars on the continent, killed two million people and displaced four to five million people, the vast majority southerners. Actually the conflict between the north and south began in 1955, with only nine years of relative peace between 1974 to 1983. This adds up to 40 years of killings and destruction.

First Vice President Ali Osman Mohamed Taha and rebel leader John Garang signed a document incorporating six accords, the building blocks for a comprehensive peace deal. The six accords agree to the self-determination of the people of southern Sudan, security arrangements, wealth sharing, and address the status of Abyei with its substantial oil reserves, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile States. There is still need for work on the implementation of the protocols, as well as ceasefire arrangements and guarantees, which hopefully will be finished within two months.

The two sides had already established that the south will be autonomous for six years, followed by a referendum on whether or not it will be independent, and that the north will remain under Shari’a (Islamic law) but non-Muslims will not be subject to it. There will be sharing of the oil revenues, separate monetary systems in the north and south, and security arrangements. There will be an integrated army as well as respective armed forces in both the north and south.

John Garang will be the first vice-president of the National Government and the president of the Government of Southern Sudan, which will have a degree of self-determination. In the disputed regions of Abyei, the Nuba Mountains and the Blue Nile States, the government will have 55 percent of the positions and the rebels 45 percent.

After the signing ceremony, Mwai Kibaki, Kenya’s president, remarked, “A giant is ready to rise and takes its rightful place among other peaceful African countries.” A long process of peace and development will be necessary in the South for it to become part of this new giant. The government fanned animosity for many years between the different ethnic groups. Many of the millions of refugees and displaced people have lost home, cattle and family members. The majority of the people in the South have chronic malnutrition and no access to primary school, immunization and antenatal care, a shocking state for the women and children.

To make development and peace a reality will require the involvement of the international community, including the neighboring states, the UN and the European Union. Especially important is the United States, which has played a significant part in bringing the two parties together to sign the protocols. It must continue its commitment to the Sudan without letting its lust for oil undermine its role. The large number of illegal guns in Sudan stands in the way of lasting peace, according to Catholic Bishop Kevin Dowling from South Africa and chair of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum.

Three bulls were slaughtered, as part of the traditional celebration of peace, in the dusty town of Yei in southern Sudan on June 8 as John Garang brought news of impending peace. The people have a right to rejoice, but peace will mean empowering the people, giving them the power to demand accountability and transparency from their new government leaders, both locally and nationally. That challenging task must begin now. CH

UN meeting on small arms

From June 14-25, country delegates and NGO representatives participated in the first session of the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) on small arms and light weapons. This was the first of three substantive sessions on this issue; the last one is scheduled for June 2005. The ultimate goal of the OEWG is to negotiate an international instrument to enable UN member states to identify and trace, in a timely and reliable manner, illicit small arms and light weapons.

There are over 600 million small arms and light weapons (SALW) in circulation worldwide. Of 49 major conflicts in the 1990s, 47 were waged with small arms as the weapons of choice. Africa remains the continent most affected by small arms, which not only fuel regional conflicts but also, because of their size and ease, facilitate the tragic exploitation of child soldiers.

For more information, see the UN’s Disarmament website at http://disarmament2.un.org.
Sudan: How do we stop a genocide?

The atrocities in Darfur, western Sudan, hit the headlines about the same time as the 10th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. While leaders around the globe have vowed that another genocide will not take place, the massacres, rape, burning of villages and bombing of civilian targets continue in Darfur. (See May/June NewsNotes.) What do we call these abominations and how can they be stopped?

Because of attacks by Arab Janjawiid militias, supported by government forces, over one million non-Arabs have been displaced within Darfur, around 200,000 people have fled to Chad, and 20 to 30,000 have been killed. A further 350,000 may die in the next few months from hunger and disease. Perhaps two million people in the Darfur region will need external aid to survive for 12 to 18 months. The government denies any collaboration in the assaults.

The immediate cause of the crisis in Darfur was prompted by a rebel uprising which started in February 2003, but there have been years of complaints by the non-Arab Muslims in western Sudan of marginalization, racial discrimination and exploitation. The Arab League sent a delegation to Darfur and Chad and came back with reports of crimes of death, robbery and rape of the Darfur people committed by the Janjawid. It condemns the grave human rights violations against the Darfur people over water resources and grazing land. Some would say that the government has an eye on a future Chad oil pipeline through Darfur.

Others go much further. Human Rights Watch implicates the Sudan government directly of supporting and encouraging an ethnic cleansing. South Africa’s Bishop Kevin Dowling, chair of the Sudan Ecumenical Forum, visited Sudan and likened the situation there to the apartheid practiced by former South African governments against black citizens. “The commander of the Janjaweed militia that is carrying out the atrocities is a general in the Sudanese government army,” he lamented (CISA June 18) The UN High Commission for Refugees spoke of “war crimes/crimes against humanity” and “a reign of terror.”

On April 7, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan reflected on the Rwanda genocide in light of the report on Darfur to the Security Council a few days before. Annan spoke of the “forcible and long-term displacement of the targeted communities, which may also be termed ethnic cleansing.” He urged an immediate response, even the possibility of military action. U.S. Ambassador to the UN Richard Williamson announced that he will call for a special session of the UN Commission on Human Rights on Sudan to condemn the ongoing ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region.

Justice Africa thinks that what is happening in Darfur fits the provisions of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Such a declaration would establish a firm international obligation to act, with financial obligations. This is why governments and the UN are wary of using the term.

At the very least, there is “massive violations of international humanitarian law,” as Kofi Annan stated, and the international community cannot stand by idle. Something must be done at once to stop the massacres, bring sufficient aid for those in need for the next year and help the displaced people and refugees return to their homes and rebuild their lives.

For more information, see Justice Africa: www.justiceafrica.org

Faith in action:

Contact Secretary of State Colin Powell and ask him to take measures to stop the genocide in Darfur and make sure they are enough funds to support those in need until they return home and can resume their normal lives. Ask that the U.S. government support a UN military force in Darfur.

Call or write Richard Williamson, U.S. Ambassador to the UN, to pressure to UN Security Council to stop the genocide in Darfur. Ask for a UN-sponsored military intervention in Darfur to disband and disarm the Janjawid militias. CH
Africa: Malaria treatment often out of reach

The following article is based on information from Doctors Without Borders, www.doctorswithoutborders.org/news/malaria, and the May 10, 2004 issue of America magazine.

“Malaria is like the common cold, but it’s a killer.” This quote from a doctor in Kajo Keji, southern Sudan is an eye catcher, but many who have had malaria may not see it as benevolent as a common cold. If malaria isn’t caught quickly enough there can be life threatening fevers, frightening nightmares, severe vomiting and diarrhea. Of course cerebral malaria can cause permanent brain damage.

Malaria kills between one and two million people each year in Africa, most of them children under the age of five. It also accounts for 30-59 percent of hospital admissions and a yearly loss of US$12 billion on the continent. Since the early 1980s the traditional treatment of a chloroquine has not been effective for the majority of malaria cases. Between 1982 and 1997 average annual cases of malaria increased to four times higher than from 1962-1981. Death rates in Africa from malaria have jumped two to threefold. Many of the malaria strains are resistant to chloroquine.

There is a drug available with combinations containing artemisinin derivatives – artemisinin based therapy, or ACT for short – and its use is literally a matter of life and death. It is a compound based on qinghaosu or sweet wormwood. When it was first isolated in 1965 by Chinese military researchers, it cut the death rate by 97 percent in a malaria epidemic in Vietnam in the early 1990s (New York Times May 10).

Without successful implementation of ACT in the next decade, significant progress in controlling malaria will be impossible. Older drugs cost only 20 cents, which was affordable to the poor but have become ineffective in most cases. The cost of ACT varies tremendously depending on the country and company. At present ACT costs an average $1.50-$2.00 for adults and 40-60 cents per child. These prices may seem very small, but for the desperately poor, the majority of people in many malaria infected countries, they are insurmountable barriers.

In many parts of Africa, ACT is already widely available as single drugs in private pharmacies for those who can afford them. But they must be made available in public health facilities as part of combinations to set the right treatment standard. Research and development for new vaccines and drugs against malaria must be significantly increased. “A 1996 report showed that an average of just US$42 was spent on research for every malaria death, compared to US$3,270 for every HIV/AIDS related death.”

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria was created in 2001 by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. The British medical publication Lancet accuses the World Health Organization and the Global Fund of being too slow to switch from chloroquine and its like to ACT, allowing millions to die needlessly. USAID, which is a major donor of the Fund, is implicated also in allowing this to happen. Why were the medical experts in the three organizations so slow in switching to ACT?

What is required is greater political will from donor countries to fund ACT and to ensure its accelerated introduction. As someone asked, “How can we go slow on malaria treatment when one African child dies of malaria every thirty seconds?”

For more information on the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, go to www.theglobalfund.org, or write to them at the Global Fund, Geneva Secretariat 53, Avenue Louis-Casai, 1216 Geneva-Cointrin, Switzerland. CH
Kenya struggles for a new constitution

There was euphoria in Kenya after the elections of December 22, 2002, when Mwai Kibaki’s National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) decisively trounced Daniel arap Moi’s Kenya African National Union by winning 60 percent of the votes. NARC made promises raising high expectations on free primary education, corruption, health care, repair of roads and better transportation, and economic improvement, but there has been significant progress only on free primary education. The lack of movement on the pledge of a new constitution within 100 days has proven to be very contentious and bitterly divisive.

Why hasn’t the new government been able to move more quickly and decisively? First, the serious car accident three weeks before the elections slowed down Kibaki. Secondly, the old ethnic power struggles emerged rather quickly with some of dubious leaders from the old regime incorporated into the new. Thirdly, elections can change faces quickly but only time and political courage will change the deeply embedded culture of corruption. Fourthly, the international scene has not been favorable to Kenya. Example are the world economic slowdown, the delay of expected outside funding and the U.S. travel advisory for Kenya, seriously affecting the tourist trade, its number one source of foreign exchange.

A new constitution is essential if there is to be political and economic progress in the country. The present constitution was based in large measure on the British colonial model of government. The post-independent government of former presidents Kenyatta and Moi amended it many times to give the president even more powers which they tended to abuse. In practice, Kenya became close to having a legal dictatorship.

The draft constitution tries to incorporate changes to make the system more democratic. For example, instead of all power being in the hands of the president as at present, there would be a devolution of power. One of the most contentious proposals is to make an executive prime minister, with a ceremonial president. Of course Kibaki’s cohorts don’t want such a thing, while some of the political parties do. Unfortunately, this conflict appears to have ethnic overtones.

Recently there was a motion to trim the president’s powers over Parliament. At this time the president calls Parliament into session and closes it as he wishes. It does seem sensible to have an independent legislative branch and judiciary, to bring more political balance.

The churches, which have contacts with people on the grassroots in all parts of the country, have done extensive civic education and have been an influential voice demanding a new constitution. The Catholic bishops, along with other religious and civil rights groups, have called for a national referendum on all the contentious clauses in the draft constitution. Many of the members of Parliament oppose this, saying that they have the final voice in the new constitution. Such a referendum would be important for two reasons. First, the people would take ownership of the constitution. Secondly, this would bypass the political animosity prevalent in the Parliament at this time.

On June 20, religious leaders called for an end to the wrangling within the ruling coalition, saying it was affecting development. They implored President Kibaki to find ways to stop the political infighting which is giving a lie to their national hopes and seriously stalling the ratification of the new constitution. Dr Timothy Njoha of the Presbyterian Church commented that, “A limping sheep cannot lead the flock to greener pastures.” The people have done their part in calling for a new constitution, the end to corruption and economic development. They deserve greener pastures. It is up the political leadership to respond. CH
UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

From May 10-21, the third session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was held at the United Nations in New York. Responding to this year’s theme of “indigenous women,” Maryknoll lay missionaries Cati Williams and Mary Denevan accompanied native women from Bolivia and Mexico to the forum.

According to the United Nations, indigenous peoples are those whose societies have a historical continuity that developed before the territories where they live were invaded and/or colonized. The 370-500 million indigenous people who live in more than 70 countries are considered distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories.

Since the 1920s, native peoples have lobbied at an international level to challenge the role governments have allocated them. Finally, in 1993 at a World Conference on Human Rights, the door to an official process was opened when that body considered establishing a permanent forum for indigenous people within the UN system. By the time the Economic and Social Council finally approved the establishment of a Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in July 2000, indigenous people were ready to assume the mandate of the forum, to fully participate in its membership and activities, and had ready, their own proposals and recommendations.

The recent session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues was attended by over 1,000 delegates whose colorful traditional dress belied their grasp of the issues before them, and their technical ability. The women addressed the forum body from their common status as guardians of seeds, mediators of peace, protectors of culture and tradition. They spoke compellingly to issues of conflict, the intrusion of agribusiness, social barriers, economic migration, and education for their children. Capable and articulate, they spoke their reality to UN member governments, and to the threatening “partnerships” of industry. Drawing on their collective experience, delegates clearly rejected the myth of “sustainable mining” in their Declaration on Extractive Industries brought forward from their preparation meetings in April.

They emphasized the crucial concern of all: the urgency of adopting the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a standard-setting document with the need of extending the International Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples to keep this process on-going. They also offered several suggestions to the Commission on Human Rights that would improve the process and function of UN bodies involved with issues between indigenous peoples and states.

At this forum, the indigenous people’s delegations revealed their original approach to the multi-layered issues imposed upon them and an undiminished determination to take charge of their future. However the forum’s mandate limits them to the role of advising UN agencies on how to deal with “aborigines, tribal and native peoples.” It remains to be seen whether or not the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights will respond with an equal sense of urgency and if the UN Forum on Indigenous Issues will be able to develop into an effective agency on behalf of the world’s original people.

For more information, go to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues website: www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii

Unaccompanied children migrate to North

On May 24, 2002, two 16-year old boys were shot by Ricardo Olvera, a member of the Mexican Army, in the Mexican town of Saltillo. The victims, Elmer Pacheco and his friend David, were on their way from Honduras to the United States. They had arrived late that night, exhausted, from San Luis Potosi and were sleeping when Olvera shot them. Three other boys were wounded, including Elmer’s brother.

Olvera escaped, but was found by the army and confessed to the murder in detail. He was taken to an army health facility, diagnosed with psychiatric problems, and released on December 2003. According to Casa Alianza, a children’s rights NGO, a second clinical diagnosis contradicted the military’s analysis; Casa Alianza calls on the Mexican Army and Mexican President Vicente Fox to accountability on the arbitrary executions of the two minors.

The Regional Conference on Migration (RCM), an intergovernmental forum of 11 countries from Panama to Canada, presented a study at the end of 2003 which indicates the increment numbers of migrant children traveling alone or accompanied by peers or adults who are not relatives. Thousands of unaccompanied children travel from and through Central America, the U.S. being their primary destination.
Corroborating with this, a survey done on foreign detainees in Mexico under the Mexican National Immigration Administration indicated that 72 percent of the children were going to the U.S., 37 percent were traveling alone, with friends, acquaintances or distant relatives, and most were new migrants.

Each year the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service detains and keeps in custody about 5,000 migrant children traveling alone, not counting those who request deportation or are held for less than 72 hours. Most are migrating for reasons of family reunification as 90 percent have families at the place of destination.

The RCM report also indicates that the age of migrant children is lowering and the number of female children is increasing. Migrant children, besides the pain, risk and anxiety associated with the migration journey, are more vulnerable than adults to maltreatment and abuse. Many tend to become street children due to maltreatment along the migration journey. This constitutes a human drama that has not received sufficient public attention. The report also calls for the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as the legal framework to protect children’s rights in general and family reunification.

For more information go to the Regional Conference on Migration’s website: www.rcmvs.org, and to Casa Alianza’s website: www.casa-alianza.org

**Faith in action:**

Contact your members of Congress requesting policies that facilitate migrant families’ reunification even when parents are not legally residents. The Safe, Orderly Legal Visas and Enforcement (SOLVE) Act of 2004, S 2381 (companion to HR 4262), provides for family reunification for legal residents, which is good but does not help families without papers.

Also, request the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as the legal international framework to protect children’s rights. **MR**

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**Debt cancellation debate: Alive and well**

On June 3, U.S. Reps. Maxine Waters (D-CA), Jim Leach (R-IA), and Spencer Bachus (R-AL) introduced HR 4511, the JUBILEE Act, groundbreaking legislation that would require the U.S. Treasury to work in appropriate multilateral settings to achieve 100 percent cancellation of the debts of 50 nations to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and to pay for this cancellation from IMF resources.

If enacted, this bill would make it U.S. policy to negotiate at the IMF for the cancellation of these impoverished country debts and would condition any future U.S. funding for the IMF on its completion of debt cancellation for the eligible countries and its termination of structural adjustment conditionality.

The IMF is one of the first creditors to be paid back by an indebted country. A country will service the debt to the IMF, not only before servicing other debt, but also at the expense of other government expenditures, especially health care and education. The JUBILEE Act encourages recipient nations to commit 20 percent of their budgets to meeting the basic needs of their nations in accordance with the UN’s 20/20 initiative.

The cancellation of debts owed to the IMF would enable the nations to invest resources in health care, education, and poverty reduction, thus building healthier and more sustainable communities, which will in turn build regional stability.

Recent reports have shown that the World Bank and IMF have enough resources to cancel 100 percent of the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) debts without any impact on their credit rating or ability to lend, and could probably expand to cover cancellation for many additional highly indebted countries.

Meanwhile, hopes were high in Georgia during the G8 meeting at Sea Island that the leaders of the world’s industrialized countries would take decisive action by committing to support 100 percent multilateral debt cancellation for impoverished nations. As the meeting ended, the Jubilee USA Network and the 50 Years Is Enough Network expressed disappointment that the wealthy nations announced a meager two-year extension of the HIPC Initiative rather than a definitive commitment to full cancellation.

HIPC, even by IMF and World Bank standards, has failed to provide an exit from the debt crisis. After eight years of the HIPC program, two things are clear: (1) when countries have more access to their own resources they use them well, and (2) HIPC has been too little relief, too slow, for too few countries and with too many conditions.

Hope remains, however, that the bipartisan JUBILEE Act, HR 4511, will legislate what the G8 has failed to propose.

**Faith in action:**

Write to your representatives urging them to cosponsor the JUBILEE Act, HR 4511. **MD**
ICCR recommends reforms for drug lobby

The following is a press release from the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR), an association of 275 faith-based institutional investors, national denominations, religious communities (including Maryknoll), pension funds, endowments, hospital corporations, economic development funds and publishing companies.

On June 3, 2004, religious and other concerned shareholders who seek improved access to health care released a series of recommended reforms to the Pharmaceutical Research & Manufacturers Association (PhRMA). PhRMA is the voice of large drug companies in Washington, D.C.

Margaret Weber, co-chair of the Access to Health Care Working Group at ICCR, explained, “We believe that PhRMA is hampered by a lack of transparency and accountability to its membership and, ultimately, to patients and shareholders. Accordingly, we are recommending a series of actions which will strengthen PhRMA. These steps will not end the public outcry over access to prescription drugs in the United States or the crisis in medicines in the developing world. However, each one will have a tangible, immediate benefit for shareholders and patients in the form of increased information and increased access to medicines.”

In letters to PhRMA Chairman-elect William Weldon and current Chairman Miles White, who are the heads of Johnson & Johnson and Abbott Laboratories, respectively, ICCR members laid out a four-pronged strategy to reform PhRMA:

- Enhance PhRMA’s transparency by public disclosing dues and expenditures,
- Make PhRMA effective for patients by creating an independent, third-party organization to implement pharmaceutical company patient assistance programs,
- Become a constructive voice in Washington by ending the use of trade agreements and trade sanctions to prevent access to generic HIV/AIDS medicines in the developing world, and
- Create an atmosphere of engagement through regular meetings with shareholders, faith-based organizations, senior citizens, consumer advocates, and others.

The full text of the letter is available on the ICCR website at www.iccr.org.

ICCR members have been engaged in dialogue with the pharmaceutical industry for over ten years and in 2004 presented shareholder resolutions before Abbott Labs, Bristol-Myers Squibb (NYSE: BMY), Eli Lilly & Co. (NYSE:LLY), Merck, and Pfizer.

For more information, contact Daniel Rosan, ICCR Program Director for Public Health, at 212-870-2317 or drosan@iccr.org.

Treaty vital to stem arms needs Senate action

The following piece is from the Arms Sales Monitoring Project, http://fas.org/asmp/.

The Senate is all too likely to fail to ratify a treaty vital to the war on terror, for the seventh year in a row. In early June, the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) called on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to take up the Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Manufacture of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives and Related Items, better known as the OAS Firearms Convention, so the Senate can ratify it in the current Congressional session. The U.S. played a key role in shaping this innovative regional arrangement in 1997 and is one of 33 signatory nations; but it cannot be a full participant without Senate ratification.

The Convention has languished in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee since 1998. The Bush administration has voiced support for it. In April, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee planned a hearing on a package of treaties, including the Firearms Convention, but the hearing was postponed. Some of the treaties on the agenda in April are now scheduled to be taken up on June 17, but the Firearms Convention does not appear to be among them.

Ratification will advance human rights and development. It seems likely to require few changes to U.S. arms export regulations. Finally it would bolster the U.S.’s record as an international team player - a boost the U.S. needs in the wake of its rejection of several popular international agreements.

The FAS summary and full report on the OAS Firearm Convention are at http://fas.org/asmp/.
Resources

1) **Pax Christi USA 2004 National Assembly**: Held **July 30 – August 1** at Barry University, Miami Shores, FL; the theme this year will be “Politics and Prophecy: Challenging the Idolatry of Empire” and will feature Bishop Gabino Zavala, Bishop President of Pax Christi USA, as the keynote speaker. Featured seminar presenters include Maria Elena Durazo, Rev. Jim Wallis, Richard Rohr, OFM, and M. Shawn Copeland, PhD. Participants have the option of beginning the weekend early by participating in the Summer Institute from 8:30 a.m. – 4 p.m. on **Friday, July 30**. The Summer Institute is an opportunity to participate in a range of skill-building and issue-oriented workshops prior to the opening of the National Assembly. Participants in the Assembly are also invited to stay on after the weekend for a day of National Action on **Monday, August 2**. Pax Christi will join with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers as part of the nationwide Taco Bell Boycott. Registration is $135. For more information, contact Pax Christi USA at www.paxchristiusa.org, info@paxchristiusa.org or call (814) 453-4955.

2) **Catholic Social Teaching: Our Best Kept Secret**. Written by Edward P. De Berri and James E. Hug with Peter J. Henriot and Michael J. Schultheis, this book is a terrific resource for students, teachers, lay people, and clergy alike. This resource outlines the history of the church’s social teaching with both recent and historical documents. Available for $20 from the Center of Concern. For more information or to place an order, visit www.coc.org or call (202) 635-2757.

3) **The Checkbook and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy**. This book of interviews conducted by David Barsamian is available from South End Press for $16. Arundhati Roy is a novelist and political essayist known for her lush language and intricate structure, as well as for searching and fierce prose. This collection of exchanges from February 2001 to May 2003, recorded by Barsamian, will enhance appreciation of Roy’s previous work for readers both familiar and new to this political figure. The book can be purchased by calling Consortium Book Sales and Distribution at (800) 533-8478.

4) **Invest Yourself: The Catalogue of Volunteer Opportunities**. This annual guide, published by the Commission on Voluntary Service and Action, provides comprehensive information about thousands of volunteer opportunities available across the United States and around the world. **Invest Yourself** has been published for more than 50 years and is the largest listing of full time voluntary service projects with non-government agencies in North America. (Most organizations have part-time opportunities as well.) For information on the CVSA or to purchase your copy of the guide, write or call the CVSA at 1 Union Square West, Suite 902, New York, NY 10003, (646) 486-2446.

5) **Mainstreaming Renewable Energy in the 21st Century**. This report addresses the timely issues of overcoming barriers to the development and use of renewable technologies and creating effective policies to advance the use of renewable energy. The report is the third in a series of four books published as the State of the World Library 2004 by the WorldWatch Institute. To order this title or any of the many others published by WorldWatch, go to www.worldwatch.org or call (888) 544-2303.

6) **Seeking Justice in Health Care: A Guide for Advocates**. This educational resource is perfect for advocacy groups, coalitions, faith groups, medical student unions, city and county officials, service organizations, social workers, and more. This grassroots information is available in either general or faith editions. Copies are $12, with discounts given on bulk orders. To order, contact Universal Health Care Action Network in Cleveland at (800) 634-4442 or email seekingjustice@uhcan.org.

7) **New resources from Earth Charter USA**: Contact Earth Charter USA for copies of these documents: *Teaching Environment in Higher Education: The Promise of the Earth Charter* (Earth Ethics, Fall 2003); *September 11 and the Earth Charter* (Earth Ethics, Winter 2002); *The Ecopoic Reader: Earth Charter Edition, Fall 2001, Vol. 2, Number 1*. Other resources are available at www.earthcharterusa.org/resources.html. Contact the Earth Charter USA office at 2100 I Street, N.W., Washington, D.C., 20037; fax: 202-778-6138; info@earthcharterusa.org