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Common denominator for the common good

This year, as election campaigns heat up and candidates lay out their visions for future policy, it is especially important that people of faith who vote wrestle with the content of candidates’ promises and proposals to discern who will look out for the common good.

In the 25th chapter of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus tells of how the Son of Man is to divide the good from the bad among the all people in all nations in final judgment. In his description, what happens to each member of society matters; in fact, human salvation depends on it!

“Then the righteous will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You [something] to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You?’ The King will answer, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these ..., [even] the least [of them.] you did it to Me.’” Matthew 25: 37-40

As people of faith we are required to think of the common good in universal or global terms, rather than in the way U.S. politics is usually done: typically an elected official goes to Washington intending to bring back the “pork” to his or her district or state so that voters will be satisfied and re-elect him or her. Now is the time to break away from this notion of self-interest disguised as leadership.

Matthew’s reading helps us to see that the common good comes about when the needs of everyone are met, even “the least ones.” Moreover, salvation depends on it – those who act with “the least ones” in mind better their chances of salvation because salvation depends on the common good. No one is saved; no one is fulfilled as a human being; as long as there are those who live with hunger, thirst, and enslavement.

Maryknollers around the world see the interconnectedness between political and economic decisions made in the U.S. and the poor quality of life for people in many corners of the world. The mission to bring about the common good is the fundamental motivation for Maryknoll’s 2008 election project, “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world.” The project takes an in-depth look at the global experience of climate change, the economy, immigration, HIV and AIDS, and peace and security.

Our planet requires an enormous amount of work to create an environment where the common good for all can become a reality. Carbon emissions from the U.S. and other industrialized countries are directly impacting people’s access to food and fresh water in distant countries as ocean temperatures rise, and glaciers melt. Radical shifts toward a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle must take place in order to meet human needs without destroying the earth for future generations.

Since World War II, the U.S. has played a key role in shaping the global economy. Today mega-corporations influence economic decision-making toward a focus on growth, wealth and prosperity. This focus benefits larger businesses while it disregards economically vulnerable people. U.S. political leaders are obligated to help change economic policies so that people in the U.S. and overseas do not suffer needlessly.

In Matthew 25, Jesus insists on welcoming the stranger, but if we look at U.S. immigration policy this is hardly the case. Immigration policy reflecting the common good would recognize the importance of global solidarity in a polarized world and respect the inherent dignity and human rights of all migrants and asylum seekers, documented and undocumented alike.

In many communities where Maryknoll missionaries work, people’s lives have been devastated by HIV and AIDS. The U.S. is in a position to provide effective prevention, care and treatment programs through continuing PEPFAR (the President’s Emergency Program for AIDS Relief) but this program can be made more effective by implementing debt cancellation and better trade policies with resource-poor countries.

The common good can never come about through war. Sustainable human and community security guaranteeing access to food, clean water, healthcare, education and meaningful work for all people everywhere ought to be the U.S. priority. This is the kind of security must be felt “even by the least ones” as Jesus indicated for all to feel secure.

As part of the 2008 elections project, the Office for Global Concerns is helping to organize the Convention for the Common Good in Philadelphia, a national gathering of over 700 community leaders dedicated to social justice. At the convention, convened by Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good and NETWORK, A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby, delegates will explore how the common good can unite people behind a platform that emphasizes interdependence, justice, charity and cooperation as essentials to good governance. Learn more about the convention and its platform at www.commongoodconvention.org.
Northern Uganda: Still hope for peace?

Joseph Kony, the Lord’s Resistance Army’s (LRA) leader, has refused to sign the Final Peace Agreement and officially end his 22-year rebellion, citing concerns for his personal security. After requesting a meeting with civil society leaders on May 10 to clarify the accountability mechanisms outlined in the agreement, Kony did not show up. He and two of his senior deputies are wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes, including rape, murder and the abduction of children. Resolve Uganda (www.resolveuganda.org) presents a disturbing picture of the current situation:

The LRA has resumed civilian abductions in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and southern Sudan; there have been reports they are preparing for renewed military operations. An attack by a group of rebels on a Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) camp in Nabanga on June 5 left 30 people dead, including 14 SPLA, six women, six children and four LRA.

Military leaders from DRC, the SPLA and Uganda, as well as the UN peacekeeping force in DRC (MONUC), have agreed to share intelligence and confront the LRA rebels. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, in a national address vowed to “destroy” Kony if he returns to Uganda.

However, local civil society leaders, notably Archbishop John Baptist Odama and Paramount Chief Rwot David Acana II, have called for restraint and continued efforts to engage direct dialogue with rebel leaders, recalling that past military offensives have caused backlash against civilians and led to greater displacement. They note that the majority of the people in the war-affected areas still agree that the process has been a significant success.

Nearly 700,000 internally displaced people were able to return to their villages during the negotiations, although a lack of basic services and security institutions is hindering their transition.

The Juba negotiations were the first initiative to address the political roots of the crisis. The parties signed five separate agreements that provide frameworks to address historical grievances, facilitate disarmament and demobilization, promote reconciliation and establish accountability for crimes committees during the war. According to Resolve Uganda, the cumulative Final Peace Agreement (FPA) is one of the most comprehensive of its kind, laying out a clear agenda for the transition to peace.

Lt. General Riek Machar, vice president of Southern Sudan and chief mediator of the peace talks, also called for continued efforts to engage the LRA. His report, issued on June 16, maintains that implementation of key elements of the Juba Agreements should begin, despite this setback. “The agreements reached in Juba,” he said, “are all legally valid: they are not provisional agreements. They require no further negotiations.”

Furthermore, according to Machar, it is urgent that the international community remain engaged in the process – as donors in support of the stable reintegration of formerly abducted and displaced people and as diplomats to reinforce the efforts of local religious and civil society leaders to restart direct dialogue between the LRA and the government of Uganda. Renewed military action, which would risk the lives of those still in LRA custody and greatly increase insecurity in the Great Lakes Region, would be a tragic mistake.

A U.S. State Department communiqué on June 17 expressed continued U.S. support for a peaceful end to the 22-year-old conflict between the LRA and the government of Uganda. It said, “We call on LRA leader Joseph Kony to sign and adhere to the FPA negotiated in talks that have now concluded in Juba, Sudan. The United States will support the government of Uganda in implementing aspects of the FPA that pertain to reconciliation, reintegration, and development in northern Uganda.

“The United States condemns the recent LRA attacks on Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Army forces at Nabanga, Sudan, and elsewhere, as well as the LRA’s abductions and other abuses of innocent civilians in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, and southern Sudan. We will continue to support regional initiatives to protect the citizens of these countries.”

Faith in action:

Write to Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Jendaye Frazer, thanking her for this statement and encouraging continued U.S. engagement in the process with an emphasis on the isolation of peace process “spoilers,” renewed dialogue and support for the peaceful reintegration and human development of formerly abducted and displaced people.
Sudan: Comprehensive Peace Agreement

On June 9, 2008, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon welcomed an agreement to resolve dangerous conflict near the town of Abyei, which lies in an oil-rich area close to the boundary between northern and southern Sudan. On Sunday, June 8, the National Congress Party of Sudan and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) had agreed to a road map to resolve the Abyei dispute, including through arbitration.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), signed by the government and former rebels in January 2005, ended the long-running north-south civil war, but an impasse since then over the boundaries and status of Abyei has been one of the stumbling blocks to fully implementing the peace accord, as the area is contested by both sides.

The Secretary General said that he “particularly welcomes the commitment of the two parties to allow the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS) unrestricted access and freedom of movement in the Abyei area.” He gave his assurances that the UN would continue to provide assistance to people who have been displaced.

In another statement, the UN rejected U.S. accusations that peacekeepers failed to protect the people of Abyei during violence there in mid-May, saying that the UN does not have the capacity or the mandate to intervene when large-scale hostilities break out. But U.S. special envoy to Sudan, Richard Williamson, asserted that UNMIS does have a mission to intervene to protect innocent people, which they did not do.

The deployment of a new Joint/Integrated Unit (JIU) battalion to Abyei and the removal of separate contingents of northern and southern soldiers will pave the way for the return of tens of thousands of people recently displaced by fighting, according to a senior official.

JIU’s were foreseen by the CPA. They are made up of an equal number of troops from the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) and fall under the command of the Joint Defense Board, an arm of the presidency. A joint police force from the southern and northern governments will also be sent to Abyei.

The town of Abyei was largely destroyed after fighting broke out in mid-May between the SPLA and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the fighting sent tens of thousands of the largely Dinka Malual and Dinka Ngok residents of Abyei fleeing southwards. Bishop Antonio Menegazzo of El Obeid told reporters at the time that about 90 percent of the huts in Abyei had been destroyed.

Roger Winter, a former special representative to the U.S. State Department for Sudan, a major contributor to the CPA process and now an advisor to the government of Southern Sudan, visited Abyei on May 16-17, immediately after the attacks. He wrote: “… [T]he town of Abyei has ceased to exist. Brigade 31 of the SAF has displaced the entire civilian population and burned Abyei’s market and housing to the ground. These events were predicted, and absent effective word and action, they became inevitable. Somehow the government of the United States of America missed all the signals – again…”

In a June 15 article in the New York Times, New America Foundation Fellow Eliza Griswold describes Abyei as the place where “two worlds collide and two governments compete for territory inch by inch; under the ground lies as much as half of Sudan’s estimated five billion barrels of oil. In many ways, Abyei is a microcosm for the entire country … If Darfur is a land grab, then Anyei is an oil grab. Last year, an estimated $529 million of oil revenues came from the region, according to the International Crisis Group … Khartoum has used the south’s oil to build the north’s infrastructure. A combination of war, sanctions and public outcry forced Western companies to abandon Sudan’s oil over the past decade, and China, among others, stepped in.”

Faith in action:

Write to President Bush and Secretary of State Rice urging the United States to remain fully engaged in the work for peace in Sudan. Specifically, to take substantive steps to: (1) ensure CPA implementation and prevent a resurgence of the North-South conflict; (2) help revitalize the Darfur peace process; (3) bolster resources and manpower for UNAMID; and (4) substantially increase bi-lateral funding for humanitarian and development needs throughout Sudan.
Zimbabwe: Prayers for transparency, solidarity

From election day on March 29 through the sham run-off presidential “elections” on June 27, the situation in Zimbabwe deteriorated greatly. The mix of a collapsed economy and extreme political repression by the ZANU-PF government of Robert Mugabe against anyone connected with or supportive of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) has been lethal.

As the run-off “elections” neared, many groups providing humanitarian aid were denied access to economically or physically battered communities. Finally, MDC candidate Morgan Tsvangirai, who had defeated Mugabe in March elections, withdrew from the run-off in an effort to spare his supporters additional trauma.

African Union (AU) leaders who met immediately after June 27 encouraged Mugabe to form a government of national unity with Tsvangirai, but the final summit statement did not take a position on the legitimacy of the run-off elections or assign blame for the violence and destruction. According to Voice of America, however, Botswana argued that Zimbabwe and Mugabe should be barred from membership in the AU and the Southern African Development Community (SADC); Senegal and Uganda favored strong action against Mugabe; and the leaders of Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone spoke clearly about the election’s lack of legitimacy.

The AU declaration encouraged Mugabe and Tsvangirai to “initiate dialogue with a view to promoting peace, stability, democracy and the reconciliation of the Zimbabwean people;” recommended that SADC mediation efforts be continued and that SADC “establish a mechanism on the ground in order to seize the momentum for a negotiated solution;” and appealed to states and all parties concerned to “refrain from any action that may negatively impact on the climate of dialogue.”

The MDC responded, “Tuesday’s resolution by AU leaders did not adequately deal with the ongoing violence in Zimbabwe, which includes reports of reprisal attacks on those who failed to vote for Mr Mugabe on Friday … [and] did not acknowledge the illegitimacy of the 27 June run-off vote….The resolution endorses the concept of a government of national unity without acknowledging that the MDC, as the winner of the last credible election on 29 March, should be recognized as the legitimate government of Zimbabwe …. [T]he basis of talks should be the first-round election.” (BBC)

Nine MDC supporters have been murdered, and hundreds more have been beaten and forced to leave home since June 27.

The MDC rejected the decision of other African countries to keep South Africa’s President Thabo Mbeki as sole mediator and refused to participate in talks about forming a governing accord until an additional mediator is appointed and ZANU-PF ends its campaign of violence. (Associated Press)

The European Union (EU) backed AU efforts to push for the creation of a government of national unity. EU spokesman John Clancy said, “Morgan Tsvangirai must be part of any transitional government and if we reflect the first round of the election where he won a majority of the vote with 47 percent then its clear that he should be a leading member of that government as its potential prime minister or the head of government to ensure that certain reforms can take place.” (VOA)

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown echoed the EU position, and added that the UK would press for tough action on Zimbabwe at the Security Council and at the G8 meeting in Japan.

President Bush instructed his administration to develop a new list of sanctions to be imposed on the government of Zimbabwe in the light of what the U.S. termed “sham elections.” The U.S. will be seeking joint action with the UN, SADC and the AU.

The words written several weeks ago by leaders of the main Christian denominations in Zimbabwe, including the Catholic Bishops’ Conference, urging the SADC, the AU and the UN to work towards arresting the deteriorating political and security situation in Zimbabwe have thus far not borne fruit. The religious leaders warned the world that if nothing is done to help Zimbabwe, “we shall soon be witnessing genocide similar to that experienced in Kenya, Rwanda, Burundi and other hot spots in Africa and elsewhere.”

Faith in action:

Continue to pray for the people of Zimbabwe. Pay attention to what happens there in the coming weeks and months. Consider making a contribution of whatever size to the Zimbabwe Solidarity Fund, which is a response to direct requests from civil society in Zimbabwe for support in the ongoing struggle for democracy, human rights and social justice. For details see www.maryknollogc.org.
Burma: Cyclone victims exploited, forcibly moved

Weeks after a killer cyclone raked the Irrawaddy Delta, the response of the junta in Burma shows little has changed in the Southeast Asian country. Stage-managing a referendum on a new constitution while hampering relief efforts for cyclone victims, the generals put their personal interests ahead of millions in need of food, housing, schools, fuel and seeds for planting.

Cyclone Nargis swept the delta May 2-3, leaving 135,000 dead or missing and destroying homes, ruining food stocks and flooding towns and crop land. Of some 2.4 million people affected, only an estimated 1.3 million survivors had received help a month later from humanitarian agencies.

Government officials repeatedly interfered with the delivery of aid, imposing visa and travel restrictions and insisting that private or foreign aid be given to government officials for distribution. Some international aid organizations were reportedly turned away at police checkpoints despite possessing authorization documents, which were then withdrawn without explanation. A month into the relief effort Amnesty International (AI) said the junta, which rejected the use of foreign military helicopters, had still not authorized the entry of nine civilian helicopters from neighboring Thailand for use by the UN World Food Program.

Amnesty reported 40 instances of Burmese soldiers and local officials diverting or otherwise misusing aid intended for cyclone survivors. Most of the cases involved authorities confiscating aid from private donors or arresting them for refusing to hand the aid over. A foreign observer told Human Rights Watch he saw three police and military checkpoints on a river searching boats, with soldiers taking rice and cooking oil as bribes to permit the boats through. The aid was from local civil society organizations, much of it being distributed under the supervision of Buddhist monks.

The government began forcing cyclone survivors out of government and unofficial resettlement camps after it announced an end to rescue and relief operations and the beginning of reconstruction on May 20. However, most of the displaced survivors could not return to their original homes because large swaths of the Irrawaddy Delta were still uninhabitable. “After surviving the cyclone’s fury, thousands of cyclone survivors are now suffering at the hands of the SPDC,” said Benjamin Zawacki, AI’s Burma researcher.

In the midst of cyclone relief efforts, the regime carried through with a referendum on a new constitution May 24. The junta said the constitution, which it claims won 92 percent approval, would lead to general elections in 2010. However, opponents said it would only strengthen the military’s control.

A draft stated that “a person who is entitled to the rights and privileges of a foreign government” could not run for office. The language seemed clearly aimed at barring from office Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years. The Nobel Peace Prize winner’s late husband was a British subject. Her party, the National League for Democracy, won a sweeping victory in the 1990 election, but the winners were never allowed to take office.
China: Limits on news reporting being reimposed

It appears doubtful that China’s initial opening to international scrutiny after the devastating May 12 earthquake reflects a permanent policy change. Immediately after the quake, news people were allowed free movement in the affected region. A month later they reported tighter restrictions on their freedom to travel and report on the disaster. Meanwhile, human rights advocates have called on the government to release Tiananmen-era political prisoners before the Olympic Games in August to demonstrate China’s commitment to human rights.

The earthquake, which devastated the southwestern province of Sichuan, killed nearly 70,000 people. The victims reportedly included 9,000 children who were trapped when their school buildings collapsed or who were buried in landslides. Angry parents complained to officials that the buildings were poorly built and alleged corruption.

China won international praise when it allowed both local and foreign media to freely move about the quake area and speak with grieving parents. However, a month later checkpoints went up on highways leading into Dujiangyan and Juyuan, two Sichuan towns where schools had collapsed.

Local journalists confirmed that officials had begun to implement new regulations on reporting. One source said news people were told to focus on heroes, especially from the government or the Communist Party, and to stay away from the issue of school collapses. In the town of Wafu, where the school was the only building to fall, a local official and police tried to stop a foreign reporter from speaking to parents.

Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch (HRW) says the Chinese government should honor its commitment to improve human rights before the 2008 Beijing Olympics by releasing an estimated 130 prisoners held since the 1989 massacre in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square. HRW says Chinese army troops massacred 2,000 unarmed persons in Beijing and other Chinese cities on and after June 3-4, 1989. It says the government continues to harass or arrest those who demand state accountability.

“The Chinese government wants the 2008 Beijing Games to expunge the memories of the 1989 Beijing massacre,” says Sophie Richardson, HRW Asia advocacy director. “China could replace the image of the lone man blocking the tanks with the image of the Tiananmen prisoners being freed – a truly Olympian gesture.”

Activist Han Dongfang, founder and director of China Labour Bulletin, links the government’s response to the May earthquake with the need to address the lingering injustice of Tiananmen Square. He praises Premier Wen Jiabao for showing “intense concern for the people” during two visits to the disaster zone in Sichuan. He also credits the media for focusing on the pain and suffering of ordinary people affected by the disaster.

But Han says the Summer Olympics, coupled with the outpouring of national unity following the earthquake, offer a golden opportunity to seek national reconciliation and address lingering resentment over the Tiananmen crackdown. “By seizing this moment and declaring an amnesty for all those still jailed in China for involvement in the May-June 1989 protests or for defending human and labor rights in the years since then,” he says, “the government could close the door on that era and inaugurate a new chapter in Chinese politics.”

During the events of May 1989 the citizens of Beijing and many other cities were united in a spirit of national solidarity, trust and hope, Han says, adding, “The government should learn the lesson of 19 years ago, when that spirit was squandered and lost in the June 4 crackdown.”

Han says if the government had responded positively in 1989 to the protests against corruption and demands for democracy, “in the short term it would have reduced antagonistic sentiments at the grassroots of society, and in the long term it would have put the brakes on runaway official corruption. … After June 1989, however, political reform not only stopped, it went into reverse.”

Another activist, Wang Dan, says he was one of 20 high-profile dissidents released from prison in 1993 “as part of China’s first charm offensive to secure the Olympics. I was released one month before the International Olympic Committee came to Beijing for an inspection tour.” He says he was later imprisoned for “subversion,” including the evidence that he had enrolled in a history correspondence course offered by the University of California.

“The Chinese people are not their government. Since 1989, my country and its people have changed much. But the government has changed remarkably little,” Wang says. “Beijing must fulfill its human rights promises and potential if the Chinese people are to emerge the true winners of the 2008 Summer Games.”
Nepal: Monarchy replaced with republic

On May 28, Nepal’s Constituent Assembly abolished the country’s 240-year-old monarchy in favor of a republic. The action came 18 months after peace negotiations ended fighting between Maoist forces and the Nepalese army. The decade-long struggle had claimed 13,000 lives. The 601-member Assembly, which will act as parliament for five years, is tasked with writing a new constitution. Any political role for former King Gyanendra, now living as a commoner in the capital of Kathmandu, seemed unclear.

Some 60 percent of Nepal’s 17.6 million voters cast ballots April 10 in the country’s first election in nine years. The election represented “our chance to stop the bleeding,” said Arpana Shrestha, a 47-year-old woman voter in Kathmandu. “Always there was blood in Nepal. Not anymore.”

The process of choosing a Constituent Assembly was the cornerstone of the 2006 peace accord. After the Assembly’s action, Gyanendra said he “respected the verdict of the people” but vowed he “will not leave this country” and go into exile.

Feelings among the country’s youthful populace – 60 percent are under the age of 35 – were mixed. Shouts of “Long live the republic!” rang out from a crowd of 500 people who watched Gyanendra leave the royal palace June 11 for the last time. However, pro-royalists expressed regret. “I feel I’ve lost a guardian,” said social worker Ambika Rana, 54. “The monarchy was a symbol of pride and unity, and I’m deeply saddened it’s not there anymore.”

Gyanendra said he would stay in Nepal to “work for the good of the country.” The English-language Kathmandu Post said in an editorial, “By choosing to quit peacefully, former king Gyanendra has kept the door open for an entry into democratic politics.”

However, a top Maoist seemed to feel Gyanendra should stay out of politics, at least for now. “He should not disturb the development of the republic, and refrain from engaging in counter-revolutionary activities … in this transitional and sensitive period,” said Baburam Bhattarai, Maoist second-in-command.

The Maoists won the most seats in the Assembly, with more than twice the number of their nearest rival, but fell short of an absolute majority. In second place was Nepal’s traditional power, the Nepali Congress, closely followed by the Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist). The Maoists, who are considered terrorists by the U.S., say they will follow the path of capitalism and will not seek to transform Nepal into a communist state.

Meanwhile, the Maoists have urged the Assembly to create a new post of president. “It is my desire to be the president,” says Maoist leader Prachanda. “But since there is no provision in the present constitution, we will have to reach some agreement with the other political parties.”

However, on June 12 Nepal’s former communist rebels quit the interim government in order to force the current prime minister out and allow their own party to form a new administration. Girija Prasad Koirala of the rival Nepali Congress party did not explain why he did not step down after his party lost the April ballot, but since then he has pushed to become president.

In the past Nepal’s king, as head of state, would have forced the prime minister aside. But after the Constituent Assembly abolished the monarchy, Koirala served as both head of state and head of government. Since he controlled the bureaucracy, the army and the police, there was no one to force him to resign.

Gyanendra, 60, assumed the throne in 2001 after his popular brother, King Birendra, and other members of the royal family were massacred by the crown prince, who then shot himself. However, he lost the support of many Nepalese when he seized absolute power in 2005 to crush the Maoists.

The ex-king will live in a former hunting lodge on the outskirts of the capital until he finds a new home. Gyanendra and his former queen will lose 600 domestic staff, but the government will allow them to keep 75 security personnel. Narayanhiti Royal Palace is to be turned into a museum.

Nepalis are hopeful, but realistic about the future. “Finally he has left. I am very happy,” said Devendra Shrestha, a 28-year-old restaurant worker. “Why do we need the feudal monarchy in a new Nepal of the 21st century?”

However, Chandra Rai, a 22-year-old plumber, said, “The change will be meaningless if the style and attitude of the new rulers don’t change. Politicians who are going to lead the new republic of Nepal must address poverty, hunger and disease facing the people. If they don’t do that it will make no difference to us, the poor people.”
Middle East: Closure restrains Gaza scholars

Israel has reportedly allowed four Fulbright scholars to leave Gaza, enabling them to take up their studies abroad this year. However, three other Fulbright awardees in Gaza were in danger of losing their scholarships as Israeli officials, citing security concerns, would not let them travel. Hundreds of other Gaza students are also waiting to go abroad to study computer science, business administration, environmental science, industrial engineering, medicine and other fields.

The U.S. State Department, sponsor of the 63-year-old scholarship program, had said it might revoke the seven Fulbrights due to Israeli delays in processing the students’ travel documents. When the media reported on the plight of the seven, however, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice—who described herself as “a huge supporter of Fulbrights”—promised to investigate. “If you cannot engage young people and give complete horizons to their expectations and their dreams, I don’t know that there would be any future for Palestine,” she said while on a diplomatic visit to Iceland. State Department spokesman Tom Casey said, “[A] decision to let people that have been vetted for what is perhaps the most prestigious foreign educational program run by the United States ... it ought to be falling off a log for them to be able to do this.”

Mark Regev, a spokesman for the Israeli ministry of foreign affairs, said he wasn’t aware there was a problem. He said Israel has an “interest in seeing people like this going to study abroad ... in view of creating a Palestinian leadership composed of individuals exposed to pluralist countries like the U.S.”

Members of the Israeli Knesset’s Education Committee called on their government to allow Gazans to study abroad. “Trapping hundreds of students in Gaza is immoral and unwise,” said Rabbi Michael Malchior, committee chair. “This could be interpreted as collective punishment. This policy is not in keeping with international standards or with the moral standards of Jews, who have been subjected to the deprivation of higher education in the past. Even in war there are rules.”

In early June the Israeli Supreme Court also called on the government to reconsider its ban on Palestinian students leaving the Gaza Strip for studies abroad. The court said the restrictions were harming prospects for peaceful coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians.

The court was hearing a petition from two Palestinian students whose requests to leave Gaza to study in Britain and Germany had been rejected by Israel. Members of the court—who whose oral arguments were not binding on the government—said the policy should be reviewed within two weeks.

Israel imposed tight restrictions on travel in and out of Gaza after Hamas took over in June 2007. A few exceptions are made for those whom the military considers humanitarian cases, but students seem to be excluded. As of last October more than 700 students were awaiting permission to leave Gaza to pursue further studies. They included 432 eyeing Egypt and 36 planning to study in the U.S.

One of those students, Wissam Abu Ajwa, has tried to leave Gaza four times. “I have almost despaired of being able to go abroad to study,” he said. “But I am not taking it too personally — Israel is punishing all of us Gaza residents. Maybe they want to punish Hamas, but we are the ones who are paying the price.”

Israeli human rights group Gisha, which promotes Palestinians’ right to freedom of movement, says burdening the Palestinian Authority’s higher education system works against Israel’s interests. It says Gazans must be allowed access to the resources they need if they are to build an educated, peaceful and prosperous society.

Israel signed a truce with Hamas that took effect June 19, raising hopes that Israel might ease its restrictions on Gaza and its population of 1.5 million. “The real question is whether the cease-fire will hold, how long it will hold, and whether it can be used to build upon and improve the situation and crisis,” said Haim Malka of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

Israel says the cease-fire agreement is one step in a larger process that must include the release of army Cpl. Gilad Shalit, who has been held hostage by militants in Gaza for two years. If Shalit is returned, Israel says it will begin to lift its economic blockade on Gaza by reopening its border crossings.

Meanwhile the U.S., which gives Israel nearly $3 billion in grants annually, should not have to mince words with its ally over the benefits of higher education — or the negative consequences if it is denied. Israel needs to recognize the pitfalls of collective punishment before it is too late. These are precisely some of the lessons that young Palestinians — whether confined to Gaza or allowed to study abroad — are learning the hard way.
Iraq: U.S., Iraqi lawmakers question security pact

President Bush has been negotiating a security pact with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in the hope of finalizing an agreement by July 31. The proposal brings up thorny issues surrounding Iraqi sovereignty and the U.S. presence in Iraq. It also raises challenging questions for the U.S. Congress, the Iraqi Parliament and the UN. Ultimately U.S. lawmakers must resolve whether the president may negotiate the pact on his own or whether it constitutes a treaty, thus requiring Senate approval.

The president says the bilateral pact he seeks with Iraq is a status of forces agreement (SOFA) like those the U.S. has signed with many other nations – countries that host more than 1,000 U.S. military bases around the world.

“But,” Phyllis Bennis writes, “those other countries – such as Germany and Japan – are not at war. Those SOFA agreements do not give U.S. troops the right to arrest German or Japanese citizens and hold them indefinitely without charges; … crucially, they do not allow U.S. troops to launch military attacks within their countries or against other countries without even pretending to consult with the local government.”

The proposed bilateral agreement with Iraq apparently goes beyond most SOFA agreements, says Bennis, a Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington, D.C. While no official text has been released – and negotiations go on behind closed doors – the agreement would reportedly allow U.S. troops to remain in Iraq indefinitely, allow the U.S. to maintain its nearly 60 military bases in Iraq indefinitely, and allow U.S. troops to launch military attacks in Iraq without consulting the Iraqi government.

In an earlier version of the agreement the U.S. promised to defend Iraq – which some lawmakers considered treaty language and thus subject to Senate approval. More recently the administration has proposed language pledging U.S. assistance to help Iraqi forces defend themselves. The administration has tried to allay skeptics’ fears by insisting the agreement would be nonbinding.

Resolution of the issue is becoming more urgent. The current UN mandate authorizing U.S.-led forces on its soil if the SOFA negotiations are unsuccessful. “Several countries on the [Security] Council – including South Africa, Libya, Indonesia, and possibly Vietnam, along with permanent members Russia and China – likely have some hesitation about the UN being asked once again to provide legitimacy for the U.S. occupation of Iraq and immunity for U.S. occupation soldiers,” Bennis says. “But there is little reason to think any of those countries – with the possible exception of South Africa – would be willing to stand up and resist U.S. pressure to give the occupation UN approval.”

The Iraqi parliament would have to approve any status of forces agreement, but the outstanding issues make an early decision increasingly unlikely. It has not been determined whether U.S. bases in Iraq would be permanent, or who would control them. Disputes also center on how freely the U.S. could use the bases, and for what operations – inside Iraq or against other countries.

The Iraqi government wants U.S. troops and other U.S. citizens who are charged with crimes to be tried in Iraqi courts. The U.S. has conceded jurisdiction in Iraqi courts over thousands of private contractors in Iraq, but it refuses to extend Iraqi jurisdiction over U.S. troops.

Maliki, who is trying to increase his credibility, cannot afford to make too many concessions to the U.S. And with provincial elections coming this fall, Iraqi parties, too, are at pains to boost their popularity by distancing themselves from the U.S. occupation. Thus, while Bush hopes for an agreement by July 31, the Iraqi parliament is unlikely to review the SOFA text until this fall.
Bolivia: Constitutional process proves difficult

Bolivia’s long and complicated constitutional process reveals an increasingly polarized society. While President Evo Morales was elected in December 2005 with a clear mandate to call a constituent assembly, the process has been plagued by an uncompromising opposition as well as questionable decisions on the part of the federal government. The strongest opposition comes from the departments (similar to states) of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and Tarija in the eastern lower lands. Previously veiled racism is coming to the fore as the country divides itself primarily along racial lines; an ever present risk exists of the situation dissolving into more violence and chaos.

Most indigenous Bolivians look to the new constitution to correct 500 plus years of marginalization, while many light-skinned elites work to maintain their privileges at all cost. The more controversial pieces of the constitutional negotiations are various types of autonomy (for indigenous, departmental, regional and municipal governments); the creation of a “plurinational” state with official recognition of indigenous rights; land reform; and use of natural resources.

The constituent assembly began in August 2006 but advanced very slowly. Congress established that the constitution must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the delegates, but it wasn’t clear if that meant each article had to pass by two-thirds or only the final document. Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), Morales’ party, which holds a small majority of delegates, argued that the two-thirds referred to the final document, while Podemos, the main opposition party, argued the contrary, knowing that a two-thirds vote on each article would give them a de facto veto. This dispute stopped negotiations for over seven months, ending when the MAS ceded the two-thirds debate.

Starting in March 2007, delegates traveled to all nine departments, collecting suggestions for the constitution. Thousands of proposals were gathered, systematized and written into hundreds of articles. As the August 2007 deadline to finish the constitution neared with many issues still to be resolved, Congress extended the deadline to December 14.

In September 2007, the constituent assembly was almost finished with the text of the new constitution when a new controversy over the location of the capital grew into a major battle, involving hunger strikes and four violent deaths. Sucre was Bolivia’s capital until 1898 when fierce clashes resulted in the executive and legislative branches moving to La Paz where they are located today; the judicial branch has always remained in Sucre. Proposals in the constituent assembly to reunite the three powers in Sucre awakened large protests on both sides. Opposition forces saw the proposals as a mechanism to stall the forming of the constitution again and did what they could to stoke the demonstrations. The Morales government offered various options from moving parts of the government to Sucre to heavy infrastructure investments in the area to try to dissipate the protests, but met with little success.

Due to increasingly violent demonstrations in Sucre, where the assembly was meeting, MAS moved the negotiations to a military academy in Oruro. In protest, many of the opposition refused to participate. Without the opposition, the assembly passed a draft of the constitution with 411 articles and 100 pages by a two-thirds vote, and turned it over to Con-
gress by the December 14 deadline. Despite strong objections from the opposition, Congress set March 4 as the date when Bolivians would vote on the draft of the new constitution.

On December 15, nearly one million people gathered in Santa Cruz and passed autonomy statutes; their goal was to vote on the statutes in a referendum on March 4. The statutes had similar provisions to the autonomy structures in the proposed constitution, though went even further allowing departments to form international treaties, among other additions.

However, the National Electoral Court ruled that neither the constitutional referendum nor the referendum on the autonomy statutes could take place on March 4, a decision that the national government accepted, but the opposition ignored. On March 4, an unauthorized vote was held in Santa Cruz; with a large abstention rate, the autonomy statutes passed by over 80 percent. The Beni and Pando departments held similar referendums on June 1 with comparable results. As the statutes are illegal, the votes represented a moral rather than an official statement.

In an effort to retake the offensive position, President Morales proposed a recall referendum for himself, the vice president and all nine departmental governors. The referendum stipulates that if these authorities receive a vote of no confidence greater than the percentage with which they won the 2005 election, they will lose their seats. The departmental officials are at a distinct disadvantage as they were all elected by percentages much smaller than Morales’ 53.7 percent. The Santa Cruz governor, Ruben Costas, won with 47.9 percent of the vote in 2005, and Beni and Pando governors won with 44.6 and 48 percent respectively. Despite the disadvantage, it appears that most, if not all, the oppositional prefects will pass the referendum, which could result in further entrenchment in opposition to the national government.

The recall referendum is set for August 10, though that date may likely be pushed back. While helping to deflect the results of the autonomy votes, the recall referendum only prolongs the inevitable need to deal with the autonomy issue and the proposed constitution. Until both sides work out a compromise on these issues, the conflicts will only continue. Changing 500 years of history is no easy task.

Latin America: Implications of INTERPOL report

In one of the biggest diplomatic crises in Latin America in recent years, the Colombian government’s claims are pitted against those of Venezuela and Ecuador regarding Colombia’s raid on a FARC camp inside Ecuador’s border and the validity of data on computers reportedly recovered from the camp. The following article was written by Zack Haas, an intern with the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

On March 1, 2008, Colombian counter-terrorist forces ambushed a Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) camp about two kilometers inside Ecuadorian territory. The FARC has been designated a terrorist group by the U.S. and others, though notably not by Venezuela. At least 23 people were killed in the raid, including FARC second-in-command Raúl Reyes, FARC guerrillas, and at least 5 civilians.

Ecuador’s President Rafael Correa and Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez objected to the raid as an aggressive act violating Ecuador’s sovereignty. They suspended diplomatic relations and moved troops to their respective borders with Colombia. President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and U.S. officials, however, framed the attack as part of the war on terror, which “knows no borders.”

Colombian troops reportedly recovered several computer-related devices from the camp, and submitted them to the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) to verify whether they had been tampered with while they were in Colombian hands. Between March 1 and March 3, the Colombian government had access to the files and did not follow international standards for handling of electronic evidence, thus the “chain of custody” was broken and evidence from the devices would likely not hold up in an international court.

Files on the devices allegedly implicate Venezuela and Ecuador with supporting or intending to support the FARC financially, materially, and militarily. Some suggest that the FARC contributed money to Correa’s presidential campaign. On May 15, INTERPOL reported that there was “no evidence that user files” had been tampered with during the two days the Colombian government had undocumented access to the computers; most media coverage and Colombian statements about the
report suggest that the report validated the authenticity and origin of the documents. Even INTERPOL’s director, Richard Noble, a former U.S. Treasury official, at a press conference with Colombian military officials said, “We are absolutely certain that the computer exhibits that our experts examined came from a FARC terrorist camp.”

These claims and interpretations are inappropriate, as INTERPOL’s report focused exclusively on whether the files were modified and when. This fact was more recently verified by INTERPOL representatives, who said that the report “does not determine if the computers…were found in the guerrilla camp…if they effectively belonged to Raúl Reyes, and even less so their contents.”

This INTERPOL clarification is particularly important, as there are doubts as to whether the equipment could realistically have survived the bombing of the camp. Colombia has not made the devices available to the media, and has only released the contents of a few documents, with no way to prove if they are even from the captured devices.

INTERPOL also clarified that while there was no evidence of tampering with user files during the crucial period between March 1 and March 3, there was also no evidence precluding such tampering.

While the Colombian government has released supposed FARC documents saying that FARC members spoke with Venezuelan or Ecuadorian officials about support, there are no communications in the files from either government to the FARC. In addition, one communication between different FARC members reportedly reveals the guerrilla’s real name in relation to his nom de guerre, which would be a faux pas for a clandestine organization such as the FARC, casting some doubt as to this document’s validity and the validity of others.

The major problem with the analysis of the report’s findings is the way they have been reported by the media. Most news sources jumped to the erroneous conclusion that the INTERPOL report confirmed that the computers belonged to FARC members and that Chávez and Correa were unconditionally implicated in supporting the FARC. Sources that resist this trend often lean too far in the other direction, believing that the report instead confirms that Colombia manipulated the files. There are precious few analyses of the situation that employ a sound understanding of the report itself, its factual implications and potential flaws, without exaggeration in one or another direction. In fact, the INTERPOL report truly sheds little light on the situation, as Colombian officials could have tampered with the files undetected or the computers may not have belonged to the FARC in the first place and are false evidence. There is also a distinct possibility that the FARC computers are entirely legitimate. Based on the evidence found, it is still impossible to come to any conclusions concerning a link between the FARC and Chávez or Correa.

**Food crisis 2008**

The current crisis of rapidly rising food prices is caused by a perfect storm of several causes. Demands from the IMF in the 1980s and 1990s, followed by requirements in trade agreements, caused a number of countries in the global South to move from food self-sufficiency to dependence on imports, making them more vulnerable to world food prices. Added to this are more recent problems with severe weather, significant shifts in land use, rising fuel prices, and a falling dollar. Unfortunately, most of the causes cannot be corrected quickly, but will require years of structural changes in how we produce and consume food around the world.

**Agriculture liberalization:** During the 1980s debt crisis, many southern governments were forced to borrow money from the IMF, World Bank and other international sources. In return for the loans, governments agreed to liberalize their economies by, among other things, eliminating state credit and subsidies for farmers, price supports, marketing boards, and extension services, all of which were considered as barriers to trade. At the same time, protective tariffs and quotas were lowered, resulting in a flood of cheaper imported food. The result was a huge increase in food imports for many of these countries. At the time of decolonization, in the 1960s, Africa was a net food exporter. Today the continent imports 25 percent of its food. Globally, about 70 percent of southern countries are net food importers.

While mandating lowered state assistance for agriculture, the international financial institutions cut their own agricultural aid as well. Between 1980 and 2005, agricultural aid fell in real terms by 54 percent, from $8 to $3.4 billion. Today, less than four percent of all foreign aid goes to agriculture with an even smaller per-
percentage going to support small-scale farmers. This massive disinvestment will take years to overcome.

Another aspect of agriculture liberalization that took place was a decrease in the amount of grains stored as reserves. Global rice and corn stocks have shrunk by almost half since the year 2000. With lower reserves, governments are less capable of confronting poor crop years and prices fluctuate more wildly.

Changes in land use: In more recent years, there have been significant changes in how we use land, with land previously used for directly consumed food being either abandoned or used for other purposes. The policies described above have devastated small farmers around the world, contributing to the abandonment of numerous farms and an increase in urbanization. Both of these trends result in less land used for farming.

More recently, many countries are working to increase the production of crops to be converted into agrofuels (referred to as biofuels by many). Land that once produced food to eat is now going to feed our insatiable appetite for car fuel. While cereal use for food and feed increased by four and seven percent since 2000, respectively, the use of cereals for industrial purposes — such as agrofuel production — increased by more than 25 percent. In the U.S., of the 48 million tons by which domestic U.S. consumption of maize increased in 2007, nearly 30 million were used exclusively for ethanol (agrofuel) production. This race to grow more fuel for transportation is a futile struggle as, according to one study, even converting all the world’s grains to ethanol would yield only 11 percent of total world oil demand.

During the recent FAO meeting on the food crisis in early June, countries from the global south complained veraciously about the role of growing agrofuel production resulting in rising food prices. Yet the final document from the meeting recommended nothing other than further study of the effects of agrofuels on food prices. Farmers’ organizations protested and were barred from entering the building where the negotiations were being held. These organizations call for a moratorium on agrofuel expansion, if not a complete abandonment of agrofuels.

Another factor that has had a strong effect of changing land use is the increase in meat consumption by the growing middle classes of China and India. As people make more money, they tend to eat more meat and dairy products. In China, meat consumption has risen from 20 kilograms per person in 1980 to 50 kilograms today. Beef is a very inefficient use of grains, as to produce one pound of meat requires eight pounds of grains. Chicken is more efficient, requiring about two kilograms of grains. The large increase in meat consumption has resulted in a drastic increase in the need for grains. While 100 million tons of grain are being diverted to make fuel this year, over seven times as much (760 million tons) will be used to feed animals. Another concern with so many cattle is that every cow produces more greenhouse gases in the form of methane per day than the average 4x4 on a 33-mile drive. They are a significant part of the world’s production of global warming gases.

Climate change: Climate change appears to play an increasingly significant role in the food crisis. Some of today’s food crisis was caused by poor harvests in Australia and other large food exporting countries. The tendency will be for an increase in difficult farming weather in much of the world as dry places become drier, leading to longer droughts and fires; and for moist places to receive more rain with resultant flooding and lost crops. Ironically, the U.S. and European nations, the countries responsible for most of the global greenhouse gases, may actually benefit from climate change as their growing seasons should expand with rising overall temperatures. Meanwhile most countries in the tropics, who contributed little to our climate problems, will feel the brunt of the negative changes.

Fuel costs: Rising fuel costs also have a large effect on food prices as our entire food system is highly dependent on fossil fuels. An increasing amount of food...
is produced on large agribusiness, usually monocrop farms. These types of farms use tractors to prepare the land, plant seeds, spread fertilizers and to harvest. They also usually require large doses of pesticides and fertilizers, all of which are made from fossil fuels. Finally, a large part of agricultural products are transported thousands of miles to be consumed. Increases in the price of fossil fuels makes food more expensive at every step. This problem will most likely continue as we are near if not already passed the point of peak oil, where production levels will steadily fall, further raising fuel prices.

**Falling value of U.S. dollar:** The weakening dollar also drives up food prices. As oil is sold mostly in dollars, oil exporters must raise the price per barrel to retain the same level of purchase power against other currencies that are appreciating. Most food commodities are also sold in dollars and so experience the same effect. Another phenomenon with the falling dollar is that, after losing almost half its value against the euro, central banks and foreign investors are looking for better places to store their money. “If the U.S. wants to remain the magnet for world capital flows it became during the 1990s, it will have to allow the savers of the world to become partners in the U.S. economy, that is, to buy into its first-rank companies.” (*Asia Times*, Sept. 5, 2007) Yet the U.S. government has made it clear that it will not allow sovereign funds to own important U.S. firms. As long as that holds true, these massive funds will continue to put their money into commodities, further increasing prices. With a struggling economy, the U.S. will be tempted to lower interest rates to spark the economy, but this will further lower the value of the dollar, exacerbating the commodities problem.

**Export bans:** In an effort to tame rising food prices, at least 40 countries have chosen to ban or tax exports in order to keep the food at home. China has banned rice and maize exports; India has banned milk powder exports; Bolivia has banned the export of soy oil to Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela; Ethiopia has banned exports of major cereals; Argentina temporarily stopped wheat exports; Brazil has suspended exports of government-owned rice; and numerous Asian countries have stopped rice exports. This has raised prices for food importing countries. One study calculated that if these bans and taxes were removed average world food prices would drop by 30 percent.

**Record profits:** While the increase in food prices has been horrible for billions of people around the world, it has been a boon for a handful of agribusiness corpora-

tions. Cargill, the world’s biggest grain trader, achieved an 86 percent increase in profits from commodity trading in the first quarter of this year. Bunge, another huge food trader, had a 77 percent increase in profits during the last quarter of last year. In just a three month period, ending in February of this year, profits for Monsanto, the world’s largest seed company, were up 108 percent, while Archer Daniel Midlands registered profit increases of 42 percent. Profits for Mosaic, one of the world’s largest fertilizer companies, rose an astounding 1,134 percent, all in just three months. These excessive profits clearly are a part of the food crisis as well.

To address most of the causes discussed above will require medium and long term strategies to fundamentally change our food production system. In the short term, there is a need for large increases in social protection programs like food or income transfers and nutrition projects, especially for children. Stopping the export bans of various countries would help, but would be difficult for many countries. See “Speculation and world food prices,” page 17, for another policy change that would have significant short term effects.

But primarily, the solutions to the food crisis are difficult, structural changes. We must abandon the current global system of large, fossil fuel-intensive farms exporting food around the world in order to establish localized, sustainable systems where most food is produced and consumed locally. This will require heavy investments in small farms, which numerous studies show are more efficient per hectare than large farms. Grain reserves must be slowly built up to allow more for more options in the future. The radical liberalization of agriculture established in the 1996 U.S. farm bill must be reversed to give the government more policy tools to make necessary adjustments. Unfortunately, U.S. legislators missed their opportunity a few months ago when they passed the new 2008 farm bill without addressing any of the fundamental problems with U.S. agriculture. Trade laws must also be restructured so as to allow incentives for local farms. The extreme concentration in agricultural markets where the top 3-4 corporations control large majorities of the world markets must stop in order to assist in the growth of small, localized farms. Agrofuels must be reconsidered and seen as only a small scale solution in certain situations. According to Via Campesina, the world’s largest coalition of small farmers, a global agrofuels market will inevitably lead to “empty bellies and full gas tanks.”
Speculation and world food prices

While most solutions to the current crisis of high food prices will require substantial reworking of our global, fossil fuel-dependent system to create a more localized and organic one (see “Food crisis 2008,” page 14), one relatively easy solution could bring quick and significant reductions in prices. Financial speculation in commodities’ futures markets has increased dramatically in the last 3-4 years, and especially in the current year, artificially driving up prices of a host of commodities, from food crops like wheat, corn, soybeans, etc., to oil and natural gas, to metals and minerals. This marked increase was brought on by simple policy decisions and can be addressed by similarly simple policies.

The first commodities market in the U.S. was formed in 1848 when merchants joined to create the Chicago Board of Trade. Before that, selling grains was an unpredictable and chaotic task. Individual farmers negotiated with sellers and faced widely varying prices and uncertainty. With the Board, farmers agreed with a buyer to deliver grain at a specific date in the future for an agreed upon price. This is called a forward contract. In 1865, futures contracts were created. These are similar to forward contracts, but instead of being directly between a producer and a buyer, are traded on an open exchange called the futures market where others can participate. Buyers on the futures market rarely, if ever, actually receive the physical product but are able to profit off changing commodity prices.

By the late 1800s, futures markets had been created for various products, with speculators betting on whether prices would rise or fall. But the influx of investors not actually involved in agriculture or food production was a problem. A casino-type atmosphere reigned with huge amounts of money entering the market procuring easy profits. Abuses, from fraud to spreading rumors in order to alter prices to buying inside information, were used to influence the market. Large fluxes in investments also affected food prices unnecessarily.

After the Depression, several laws were passed to regulate markets in order to prevent another economic collapse. One was the Commodities Exchange Act of 1936, which for the first time put limits on speculative investors to prevent them from manipulating commodities futures markets. People directly involved in agriculture and food could still participate in the futures market in order to provide liquidity, but outside investors had severe limits placed on the manner and amount they could invest.

These limits were maintained until Ronald Reagan’s presidency. Pressure from investors and the administration’s predisposition towards deregulation led to apparently small changes in commodities laws that have large effects on food prices today. The Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CTFC) created loopholes that allowed outside investors to invest unlimited amounts in commodities.

Negative results from these loopholes were first seen when Enron took advantage and invested huge amounts in energy futures, driving up prices while creating huge profits for itself, thus naming these types of loopholes “Enron loopholes.”

Financiers did not immediately invest in the food commodities markets as they provided lower profits than other areas of investment. This changed after the stock bubble burst in the year 2000. Investors pulled vast amounts of money from the stock market, deflating the bubble. Much of that money was placed in the housing market, thus creating a bubble in that market. As the housing bubble bursts, many investors have now switched to commodities futures, and with the Enron loopholes they are able to plow immense amounts of money in these markets.

Hedge fund manager Michael Masters recently testified before Congress on this issue. He said that institutional investors (pension funds, university endowments, sovereign wealth funds, etc.) have increased their investments in commodities futures from $13 billion in 2003 to $260 billion in March 2008, and the price of 25 commodities have risen by an average of 183 percent in those five years. He explained that “commodities futures prices are the benchmark for the prices of actual physical commodities, so when… speculators drive futures prices higher, the effects are felt immediately in… the real economy.”

Futures markets tend to be rather small compared to other investment markets. In 2004, the total value of futures contracts in 25 principal commodities was only $180 billion; compared to $44 trillion invested in stock markets worldwide. So when these outside investors enter with large sums of money into the commodities futures markets, they drive up overall prices for those products. In the first 55 days of 2008, speculators placed $55 billion into these markets. Clearly these huge influx-
es of money are having dramatic effects on today’s rising food prices. According to Masters, “one particularly troubling aspect of... speculator demand is that it actually increases the more prices increase.” We already see this happening as investment advisors increasingly encourage clients to invest in commodities futures. These types of investments could easily increase to as much as $1 trillion if institutional investors switch a greater portion of their investments into commodities futures. This would result in catastrophic increases in food prices.

Masters draws an analogy that is helpful with these complex dynamics. “Think about it this way: If Wall Street concocted a scheme whereby investors bought large amounts of pharmaceutical drugs and medical devices in order to profit from the resulting increase in prices, making these essential items unaffordable to sick and dying people, society would be justly outraged.” This dynamic currently takes place in our commodities’ system, driving up food and oil prices. He estimates that with greater regulation, oil prices could drop to $65 to $70 a barrel within 30 days. Similar drops would take place in food commodities.

Luckily, members of Congress are waking up to this reality. Nine bills have already been proposed to remove the Enron loopholes and reduce speculative influence on oil and food commodity prices. It is crucial that they pass these laws as quickly as possible as every day, more speculative money floods into the commodities markets. As one wheat farmer recently stated, “We’re commoditizing everything and losing sight that it’s food, that it’s something people need. We’re trading lives.”

**Faith in action:**

Call Congress to act quickly to remove speculative investments from the commodities futures markets. Call your pension fund manager to see if your pension is invested in commodities futures markets and demand that they divest from these markets.

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**Climate change crisis at U.S.-Mexico border**

_The Catholic Diocese of El Paso’s Tepeyac Summer Institute offers three weeks of classes in English and Spanish with 42 courses, retreats and Saturday workshops. This year one of the courses offered was “Climate change crisis: The faith challenge.” The course itself might have been offered any place today and been entirely appropriate, but El Paso, situated in the U.S. southwestern desert at the junction of Texas, New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, brings together important factors that highlight the global climate change crisis, making it a timely location._

Fort Bliss, located in El Paso, is currently undergoing a transition that will bring 60,000 more personnel to the base. The new staff and their families will cause pressure on El Paso for a wide range of needs including waste management, sanitary and water services.

Water is of particular concern. El Paso and Ciudad Juarez had an adequate supply of potable water located in an underground aquifer, but today, the fresh water supply is reaching its end. A deeper supply of underground water is brackish and can be used only if it undergoes desalination. The U.S. Army and the city of El Paso have erected a new desalination plant. Unlike seacoast desalination facilities, the waste from this process will be put back into the earth presenting a concern as to the ultimate effect of this procedure.

Speaking of waste, across the Rio Grande in Ciudad Juarez, a chemical processing plant, Solvay Fluorides, SA, Mexico, produces ammonium hydrogen fluoride and hydrogen fluoride, both possibly carcinogenic. Waste from these products is heaped outside the plant by the highway, forming what appear to be low white hills. From these waste heaps toxic material is airborne to the surrounding area, irrespective of political borders.

In addition, a copper smelting plant, Asarco, located in El Paso close to the river, had been closed but recently petitioned to reopen and resume operations. Toxic waste from this plant is also piled along the highway.

This summer, new steel segments of the U.S. border fencing have crept along the New Mexico border towards El Paso, a stark reminder of the unresolved human crisis that causes Mexicans to risk crossing the border into the U.S. without proper documentation. It brings into question global economic policies and weak political processes that leave multitudes of people in desperate circumstances over lack of livelihood and unmitigated poverty and hopelessness. In Ciudad Juarez, where people accumulate either hoping for a chance to the cross the border, or having been returned or deported,
UN: Time to kick the carbon habit

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon gave the following message on World Environment Day, “Kick the habit: Towards a low carbon economy,” June 5, 2008.

“Addiction is a terrible thing. It consumes and controls us, makes us deny important truths and blinds us to the consequences of our actions. Our world is in the grip of a dangerous carbon habit.

“Coal and oil paved the way for the developed world’s industrial progress. Fast-developing countries are now taking the same path in search of equal living standards. Meanwhile, in the least developed countries, even less sustainable energy sources ... remain the only available option for the poor.

“Our dependence on carbon-based energy has caused a significant build-up of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. ... We know that climate change is happening, and we know that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that we emit are the cause.

“We don’t just burn carbon in the form of fossil fuels. Throughout the tropics, valuable forests are being felled for timber and making paper, for pasture and arable land and, increasingly, for plantations to supply a growing demand for biofuels. This ... not only releases vast amounts of CO2, it also destroys a valuable resource for absorbing atmospheric carbon, further contributing to climate change.

“... Ecosystems -- from mountain to ocean, from the poles to the tropics -- are undergoing rapid change. Low-lying cities face inundation, fertile lands are turning to desert, and weather patterns are becoming ever more unpredictable.

“The cost will be borne by all. The poor will be hardest hit by weather-related disasters and by soaring price inflation for staple foods, but even the richest nations face the prospect of economic recession and a world in conflict over diminishing resources. Mitigating climate change, eradicating poverty and promoting economic and political stability all demand the same solution: we must kick the carbon habit. ...

“... With the climate crisis upon us, businesses and governments are realizing that, far from costing the Earth, addressing global warming can actually save money and invigorate economies. While the estimated costs of climate change are incalculable, the price tag for fighting it may be less than any of us may have thought. Some estimates put the cost at less than one percent of global gross domestic product -- a cheap price indeed for waging a global war.

“... Even better news is that technologies already exist or are under development to make our consumption ... cleaner and more efficient and to harness the renewable power of sun, wind and waves. The private sector, in particular, is competing to capitalize on what they recognize as a massive business opportunity.

“Around the world, nations, cities, organizations and businesses are looking afresh at green options. At the UN, ... the plan for renovating our New York headquarters should follows strict environmental guidelines. I have also asked the chief executives of all UN programs, funds and specialized agencies to move swiftly towards carbon neutrality.

“Earlier this year ... CN Net [was launched] to energize this growing trend. Its inaugural members, which include countries, cities and companies, are pioneers in a movement that I believe will increasingly define environmental, economic and political discourse and decision making ...

“The message [today] is that we are all part of the solution. ... [T]here are many steps you can take to reduce your carbon footprint. It is message we all must take to heart.”
Cluster Munitions Treaty

Following years of work by activists and survivors around the world, 111 nations, after intense negotiations, agreed in late May to ban the production, use, stockpiling and export of all existing cluster munitions. The new international Cluster Munitions Treaty commits their governments to stop using these weapons and to destroy their existing stockpiles within eight years.

The U.S. government did not attend the negotiations, held in Dublin, Ireland, and actively worked to undermine them. But in the end all other major NATO countries joined with the majority in agreeing to ban these weapons, which are designed to kill or maim every living thing in an area as large as two football fields. The vast majority of victims of cluster bombs have been civilians.

The treaty also requires governments to clear existing cluster munition minefields and to provide adequate assistance to individuals and communities affected by cluster munitions. “The victim assistance provisions set a new precedent for survivor rights worldwide,” said Tracey Begley, a program officer with Survivors Corps and a member of the USCBL steering committee. “The treaty recognizes the human rights of victims and acknowledges that victims are not just the individual survivors, but also their families and communities that are affected.”

At the start of the Dublin Conference, key areas of concern included: victim assistance, joint military operations, transition period, stockpiling, clearance and definitions.

The controversial provision on joint military operations with states that refuse to join the treaty was disappointing. Campaigners insist that the treaty must be interpreted to prohibit foreign stockpiling and intentional assistance with use of the weapons.

Proposals for transition periods allowing states to use the weapons for anything between seven and twelve years were quashed by affected states. Stockpiles of existing weapons must now be destroyed within eight years. After a lot of work on definitions of cluster munitions – which weapons are included or not in the ban – all types of existing cluster munitions are now banned, including M85s, BLU97s and MLRS weapons. Millions of explosive submunitions are now slated for destruction for those states that join the convention.

The next steps in the United States, according to Lora Lumpe, coordinator of the U.S. Campaign to Ban Landmines, will be to grow support in Congress for the Cluster Munitions Civilian Protection Act, to persuade all presidential candidates to endorse the treaty negotiated in Dublin, and to challenge the perception in the U.S. military that these weapons are a legitimate part of the stockpile of a civilized nation.

In fact, a few days after the Dublin Conference, Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT), and Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA) introduced a joint resolution calling on the U.S. to sign on to the Convention on Cluster Munitions when it becomes open for signature in December 2008.

“The United States should not sit on the sidelines,” Sen. Feinstein said. “The United States should join the 111 other countries that have endorsed this effort, and we should take a leadership role in bringing other nations on board. Doing so is consistent with our values and our national security interests.”

Sen. Leahy said, “One of the many lessons of wars today is that so many are fought in the midst of civilian populations. Far more can and should be done to reduce civilian casualties and the anger and resentment they cause toward our own troops. Cluster munitions, like landmines and even poison gas, have some military utility. But weapons that are scattered over a wide area, which often fail to detonate until triggered by unsuspecting civilians, often children, have no place in the 21st century.”

“Cluster munitions kill indiscriminately,” Rep. McGovern said. “The United States should be leading the way in eliminating these weapons; instead, the Bush administration is dragging its feet. That is not acceptable. I commend the dozens of nations that have signed the treaty, and look forward to working with my colleagues and the next administration to add the United States to that list.”

The resolution is co-sponsored by Sens. Ben Cardin (D-MD), Bernie Sanders (I-VT) Russ Feingold (D-WI), and Sherrod Brown (D-OH).

Faith in action:

Urge your members of Congress to insist that the U.S. sign the Cluster Munitions Treaty when it comes up for signatures in December in Oslo.
UN: High Level Review on HIV/AIDS

“I will honor my commitment and so I ask: Will you honor yours?” -- Ratri Suryadarma

Held June 10-11, the 2008 UN High Level Review (also known as UN General Assembly Special Session, UNGASS) was to be a “comprehensive review of the progress achieved in realizing the Declaration of Commitment [2001] and the Political Declaration of 2006.” Requesting country reports (including the participation of civil society), the pre-meeting report of Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stressed the need for stronger commitment and action. The report points out that “in 2007, the number of new HIV infections was 2.5 times higher than the increase in the number of people receiving anti-retrovirals.” The report also named vulnerable groups (such as people who use drugs, sex workers and men who have sex with men), as well as indicating the importance of scaling up focused HIV prevention programs and strengthening programs for people living with HIV, the crucial need for women centered programs, and the need to implement sustainable strategies.

In mid-2007, the Civil Society Task Force (CSTF), which included people living with AIDS, representatives of vulnerable populations, faith-based groups, unions and businesses, from all geographical regions, began setting up a mechanism by which civil society would have an active voice during the review.

Focusing on the World Health Organization’s goal of “Universal Access 2010,” the CSTF identified concerns that included travel restrictions for persons living with HIV; inclusion of at-risk populations in programs and planning; inclusion of civil society, especially people living with HIV, at all levels; increased financial resources and the recognition of gender inequality as well as human rights as central to achieving the goals that have been set.

Ratri Suryadarma, a Malaysian woman living with HIV, spoke eloquently at the opening plenary about stigma, human rights and the need for the will and action to achieve universal access. The civil society hearing was to have “actively engaged government representatives on 10 key issues” including HIV and human rights, women and girls, sex workers, people who use drugs, workplace responses, young people living with HIV, and access to treatment, but despite the preparations and excellent presentations, few government representatives attended the hearing.

The 2008 UNGASS differed from the previous two in that there was no negotiated document, thus civil society had little to say in the final outcome document. Although many civil society representatives felt that they had more space for speaking than in the past, the civil society hearing was one hour shorter than in 2006, and most of the government representatives were civil society members on the government delegations.

Other reactions included the concern that few heads of state attended the meeting, and many of the country reports did not report the reality as it is lived out by people living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. None of the UNGASS 2003 or 2005 goals have been reached, causing people to worry that universal access will not be reached by 2010, but rather that the worsening situation of AIDS will lead to further poverty and underdevelopment.

The final civil society declaration asked governments, the UN system and all stakeholders to attend to the following issues:

- Universal access by 2010 requires all resources and political will at all levels NOW.
- Human rights at the center of all responses.
- Resourcing the response, especially calling on the G8 to honor the commitment to contribute 0.7 percent of their GNP for development assistance.
- Access to treatment, including ensuring that governments can use the safeguards guaranteed by the Doha Declaration.
- Greater involvement of civil society, as identified by the UN as a critical strategy to combat AIDS and including all voices, especially marginalized groups and people living with HIV.
- Accountability, calling on all countries to report and to UNAIDS and civil society to effectively monitor and evaluation national responses.

Much hard work is to be done on the long road ahead. Many people felt that governments said or reported nothing new, no concrete proposals were made, and that in fact we are falling behind. The sense of urgency felt by women, youth, vulnerable populations and people living with the virus does not seem to reach the government level. We must start today -- wherever we are -- to speak and act more loudly; and we must hold our governments accountable each and every day to the commitments which they signed. Millions of deaths are preventable, but we must act now.
Torture: Movement in Supreme Court, Congress

In a new series of reports on the detention policy of the Bush administration, McClatchy News interviewed 66 released detainees who had been held at various sites, including Guantánamo Bay, Cuba (GITMO). The reports indicate that Guantánamo’s infamy for “enhanced interrogation techniques” and harsh detainee treatment may have been moderate when compared to treatment at other military facilities, such as Bagram Air Base and Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan, or Abu Ghraib in Iraq. (http://www.mcclatchydc.com/detainees/) The following article was written by Emily Thrush, an intern with the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns through the Discipleship Year program.

Since 2002, GITMO has held approximately 770 men, 500 of whom were released without charges after being held for many months and years. Fewer than 10 prisoners have been charged with anything. In June, the Supreme Court ruled that virtually every detainee held at GITMO has the right to question his detention, per the centuries-old right of habeas corpus. This puts an end to the Bush doctrine of indefinite detention for those they deem as “enemy combatants.” Gitanjali Gutierrez, a lawyer who represents several Guantánamo prisoners, said, “This ruling shows that, just as the (Constitution’s) framers intended, the judiciary has the responsibility to hold the executive accountable. It makes sure the government has the right people in detention and eliminates the temptation to engage in lawless abuses because no court is watching.”

Critics of the decision, including President Bush, presidential hopeful Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), and the Military Commissions Act architect Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), bemoan the Court’s decision as dangerous and befitting of an activist judiciary. But the majority opinion cites foundational principals from the Federalist Papers and calls on the ancient writ of habeas corpus to defend the decision. Justice Anthony M. Kennedy quoted Alexander Hamilton, “[T]he practice of arbitrary imprisonments, have been, in all ages, the favorite and most formidable instruments of tyranny.” The case, Boumediene v. Bush, was heard in December 2007 and settled on June 12, 2008.

Several important Congressional hearings took place in June, which is International Torture Awareness Month. The Senate Armed Services Committee held a hearing on June 17 in which Pentagon lawyers testified about the creation of the “enhanced interrogation” program which has been under fire since its inception six years ago. The hearing revealed that Pentagon lawyers actively pursued information about harsh techniques that the U.S. military uses for training purposes only. The military program SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) trains service people for the event of capture by a hostile force not be party to the Geneva Conventions. The hearing on June 17 revealed that Pentagon lawyers used information on techniques from the SERE program to incorporate into their offensive plan for U.S. interrogations of enemy combatants, thereby implicating the U.S. in actions strikingly contrary to both U.S. and international law.

On June 18, the House Judiciary Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights, and Civil Liberties met to continue their investigation of the relationship between administration lawyers and administration interrogation rules. Col. Lawrence B. Wilkerson testified as the former Chief of Staff to then-Secretary of State Colin Powell. In April 2004, Secretary Powell asked Wilkerson to investigate what happened at Iraq’s Abu Ghraib prison. Wilkerson’s search uncovered a pattern of legal maneuvering that manipulated loopholes in international law (especially in the Geneva Conventions) to form the foundation for the burgeoning U.S. aggressive interrogation program used against detainees at GITMO, in Iraq, and Afghanistan.

Wilkerson tried to balance his research by rereading a memo signed by President Bush from February 7, 2002, entitled “Humane treatment of al Qaeda and Taliban detainees.” Despite the assertions listed in Bush’s memo, however, mounting evidence led Wilkerson to testify on June 18, “My own government had sanctioned abuse and torture which, at its worst, had led to the murder of 25 detainees in a total of at least 100 detainee deaths. Death, Mr. Chairman, seems to me to be the ultimate torture, indiscernible and final. We had murdered 25 or more people in detention; that was the clear low point of the evidence.”

More hearings are scheduled in the coming weeks to continue the investigation of what led to the administration’s position on the “safe and lawful techniques,” as President Bush maintains, that are used to interrogate prisoners of the “war on terror.” Check www.house.gov or www.senate.gov for hearing schedules. Live feeds and transcripts are available on each committee website.
Blackwater Worldwide

The “war on terror” has changed how world leaders operate, how armed forces function, and what constitutes “business as usual” in war-zones. Most notable is an extraordinary rise in private contractors in military operations, tasked with jobs as mundane as food preparation and laundry to jobs as crucial as security detailing for U.S. diplomats and prisoner interrogations that have joined the “coalition of the willing” in Iraq and Afghanistan. The following article was written by Emily Thrush, an intern with the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns through the Discipleship Year program.

Some see the privatization of security operations as a natural extension of the free market – the government has a need that the military is unable to adequately meet, so corporations such as DynCorp, Triple Canopy, and Blackwater Worldwide bid for the jobs and earn billions of dollars in public funds.

Currently, over 100,000 private forces, not all armed, operate in Iraq. Some estimates suggest at least 25,000 contractors engage in “combat-like operations” versus support services.

Founded by Erik Prince, Blackwater began as a training facility for law enforcement and military personnel. At the request of the State Department, Blackwater entered the security business in order to provide highly trained defensive services for officials who were unable to find security through the U.S. military or State Diplomatic Security detail. Blackwater did not bid on its initial contract with the State Department, but instead was “awarded” a no-bid $27 million contract to protect key figures in the fragile Coalition Provisional Authority set up in the early months of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Many Blackwater employees are former U.S. military or intelligence personnel, including some retired top officials from the Bush administration. One notable example is J. Cofer Black, who spent nearly 30 years with the CIA and then joined Blackwater’s leadership. Black is known for his involvement in the extraordinary rendition program—capturing suspected terrorists and sending them to nations that have less stringent rules on interrogations, a practice denounced by human rights groups worldwide as indirect torture. He now heads Blackwater’s new division, Total Intelligence Solutions, which offers CIA-type services to both Fortune 500 companies and foreign (or U.S.) governments.

Blackwater remains integral to the daily operations of the U.S. military in Iraq, despite its involvement in the horrific incident on September 16, 2007 in Baghdad’s Nisour Square. A convoy, protected by Blackwater operatives and guarding State Department officials, entered the traffic roundabout in mid-day bustle. When they entered the square, chaos ensued. Blackwater claims it was fired upon, so it responded with necessary force, killing 17 women, children, and unarmed men.

A U.S. military unit arrived at the scene within a half hour of the shootings, and early reports indicated no insurgent fire based on the casings they found at the scene. The unit’s leader, Lt. Col. Michael Tarsa, described the shootings as “unjustified and unprompted,” labeling the event “criminal.” An FBI investigation, which started two weeks after the incident, is ongoing. Blackwater suspended its operations for three days after the shooting, in which time no State Department official could move anywhere outside the Green Zone, and then resumed business. State Department investigators interviewed some of the Blackwater guards after the incident, but granted them immunity from criminal prosecutions for their statements. In April 2008, the State Department renewed its contract with Blackwater Worldwide, defending the company’s solid performance in protecting State Department officials.

Members of Congress have questioned the accountability of private contractors, noting that military men and women answer to a strict code of conduct and pledge to uphold the Constitution, but private contractors answer to their CEO. Prince claims that his contractors are under the Military Extraterritorial Jurisdiction Act (allowing civilian contractors to be subject to the court-martial system) and that since many of them had come from the U.S. military, they understand the stipulations for the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The enforcement arm of these statutes, however, lies in the Justice Department, which enjoys protection from the very companies they would investigate.

Greater accountability and transparency regarding the private sector engagement in the war effort is needed. Citizens can encourage their members of Congress to increase their oversight and commit to asking tough questions of contractors, administration officials, and the military.