



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

NewsNotes

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Inauguration Day: Challenging times, new hope

In wrapping up our 2008 election project, “Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world,” the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns’ staff reflected on the readings for Inauguration Day, Tuesday, January 20 (Hebrews 6:10-20; Psalms 111:1-2, 4-5, 9-10 and Mark 2:23-28), which are extremely appropriate. The following piece reflects the comments, hopes and fears that the staff shared when looking ahead to a new Congress and administration in 2009.

Today, as Barack Obama takes the oath of office, the reading from Hebrews reminds us that God’s promise repeatedly renewed in every generation also is an oath -- one that encourages us to hold fast to the hope that lies before us. Certainly hopes are raised whenever a new president and Congress begin their work, and this inauguration is especially hopeful as the first person of African descent is sworn into the highest office in the United States. At the same time, this president, this Congress and the U.S. people face daunting challenges.

U.S. headlines blare news of bursting bubbles, inflation and debt resulting in unemployment and economic difficulties on a personal and national level. Inflation and debt rates have never been higher, and they are increasing exponentially. Maryknoll missionaries in Asia, Africa and Latin America witness how these difficulties reverberate in the lives of the people they accompany. As food and energy prices rise beyond their reach, hunger spreads and suffering and hardship deepen.

Moreover, as we approach the reality of peak oil and other decreasing natural resources, we are reminded of the earth’s real limits. People in Asia, Africa and Latin America know the fragility of the earth in an intimate way as colonialism’s legacy of environmental degradation exposes them to the direct impact of climate change.

We are living in unprecedented times that call for unprecedented action. Today’s Gospel calls us to take a long, hard look at our history and tradition and reinterpret customs, laws and paradigms to create new responses to this present reality. Jesus called the Pharisees (who saw themselves as keepers of the law and tradition) to do just that – to reinterpret their thinking about the Sabbath and to remember when in times of extreme hunger, rules were overlooked so that people could survive.

Jesus says to the Pharisees: “The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.” The Sabbath and the Jubilee year were established, in part, to ensure that all would have enough for a life of dignity. Leviticus 23:22 demands that some of the harvest and its gleanings be left for the poor and strangers so that they could take what they needed. Just as Jesus brings the Pharisees back to the intent of the law, we need to return to the true meaning of development – to create the infrastructure needed to support societies while not depleting the earth and its resources.

In many ways our economic system has become like the restrictive Pharisaic tradition. For years global economists, governed by the “law of economic growth,” have equated GDP growth with development. But in many parts of the world where Maryknoll missionaries work the most impoverished people and the environment are bearing the burden of this equation. In many countries we have seen whole sectors of the economy, such as small scale and subsistence farms and small, locally owned businesses, destroyed while good laws meant to protect the worker and the environment are weakened or ignored.

On this inauguration day, as many feel a tremendous sense of hope in the new decision makers being sworn into office, Hebrews speaks of the earnest eagerness for the fulfillment of hope, while reminding us not to become sluggish. It tells us that we too, if we work with faith and patience, can inherit the promise of hope. This is a fitting reminder that we must remain engaged with the new administration and Congress to make known our vision of justice and peace for our country and for our world. We cannot become sluggish. Our future, the future of people living in resource-poor countries and the future of our planet depend on it.

Faith in action:

Download a copy of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns’ policy proposals for the new administration and Congress at www.maryknollogc.org and schedule a meeting with your representatives’ home offices to deliver and discuss them. Or come to Ecumenical Advocacy Days (www.advocacydays.org) March 13-16 and visit them in Washington, D.C.

Sudan: Fragile peace between North, South

In early November a small Pax Christi delegation visited Sudan to express support for the post-violent conflict process of reconstruction there following the 2005 signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and to observe the early stages of a Pax Christi-related integrated peacebuilding project in South Sudan. Marie Dennis, director of the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns and co-president of Pax Christi International, participated in the delegation. Her reflections follow.

We arrived in Nimule, Eastern Equatoria in the middle of a peacebuilding conference organized by the Sudan Council of Churches (SCC) that brought together about 250 people from Magwi County to promote harmonious co-existence; to deepen understanding of the CPA; and to identify core issues for common action, including land and security, law and order, and human rights.

There we interviewed many different people including women, religious leaders, youth, elders in Madi communities originally from Nimule who had been living in refuge outside of Sudan for over 15 years and elders in communities displaced - also for over 15 years - from elsewhere in Sudan to Nimule. Many of the people with whom we spoke were still waiting for a “peace dividend” from the CPA to be evident in improved health, education or infrastructure. They told us about the dangerous proliferation of guns in civilian hands, but also about the risk of making one community vulnerable to another by disarming one without disarming the other. They spoke about tensions between herders and farmers and about the huge need for voter education in advance of the coming general elections (July 2009) and referendum (2011).

The elders from communities of internally displaced persons (IDPs) were particularly poignant in their remarks: *We are tired, they said, and want to rest. There were no problems among us* (between IDPs and those original inhabitants of Nimule who are now returning from refugee camps in Uganda and elsewhere), *except for the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA - from northern Uganda that used to cross the border into Sudan regularly). Sometimes we have differences because we are from different cultures, but that’s why we have chiefs and community leaders. A big concern for us is how to go – how to move our cows. We won’t stay here – our gardens*

are there; our cows have no place to graze here; but also there are no schools there. Our children are in universities in Uganda. We have accepted some of the Madi customs; our children have intermarried. Even when we go we will always be related.

Officials we met later in Juba identified many of the same challenges, emphasizing in particular their concerns about the Multi Donor Trust Fund managed by the World Bank, which one described as “worthless,” and their belief that free and fair general elections by July 2009 will be impossible. The Electoral Commission was just named in November, yet it needs to set the process, produce election materials, oversee voter education, etc. – and all for a country that has never voted. Media laws and national security laws will also be needed before the elections. The recently taken census and North/South border issues remain contentious.

While we were in Juba, the Sudanese Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued a strong statement about the slow implementation of the CPA, calling on the international community to re-engage. The bishops’ letter, which analyses the political situation in the Sudan, calls for genuine elections and emphasizes the need for a change of attitude in order to enact the principles of democracy and good governance. Bishop Rudolph Deng Majak, president of the Sudan Catholic Bishops Conference, asked Christians and Muslims to refocus on the CPA and urged leaders to mobilize the faithful to walk together, reconciled and united, to implement the peace agreement. (Catholic Information Service for Africa- CISA)

In Khartoum we heard again that the CPA is still waiting to be implemented. When people refer to “the government,” they mean the radical Islamist National Congress Party (NCP), not the government of national unity established by the CPA. The NCP would prefer to delay implementation of the CPA and has itself managed to morph from a terrorist-harboring regime to a U.S. ally in the war on terror. The coming general elections are critical. Youth have never experienced voting – no vote has taken place for 20 years. Again we were told that voter education and preparations for election monitoring are extremely important and that churches and religious groups with regular gatherings and already developed means of communication could be very important in this regard. People need education about the importance of voting and they need preparation

for the complicated vote scheduled in 2009, which will elect many officials. If the NCP is legitimized by “winning” elections, even because of a poor process, inadequate preparation or graft, there will be no excuse for Sudan or for the international community. On the other hand, if the regime does not accept the results of the elections, they will be violating an international agreement and will also lose the South.

Actually, one person said, opposition parties in the North may be more interested in the CPA and in a united Sudan than the regime. The regime is not doing anything to keep the country united. The

regime tried to empty South Sudan and is now trying to empty Darfur. The referendum in 2011 will be for secession unless there is a miracle or fraud. Only those who are politically aware would see any reason to vote against secession. If the South secedes, the regime will tighten its grip on the North.

Faith in action:

Read the Sudanese Catholic bishops’ letter, “Be messengers of peace,” available at www.maryknollogc.org, in the Africa section.

Kenya: Commissions report on violence

It has been a full year since violence following the disputed election of December 27, 2007, wracked the nation and fabric of Kenya. After the political agreement between the two major political parties was signed on February 28, with mediation by former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, peace slowly returned to the country. However, a total of 1,133 people were killed; over 300,000 were displaced; the tourist industry, Kenya’s main foreign exchange earner, was devastated; and the cost to the economy was estimated to be \$1.5 billion. On Christmas Day, over 20,000 remained in camps for internally displaced people (IDPs), and many who have returned to their homes in north Rift Valley Province refuse to rebuild their houses, fearing a future outbreak of violence. Two commissions issued thorough reports, on the election itself and the other on the violence. On December 17, 2008, the government formally accepted these reports and began implementation of their recommendations.

The first report to be issued was on the election itself, and was handed to Kofi Annan by Justice Johann Kriegler, the chair of the Independent Review Commission, on September 18, 2008. Known as the Kriegler Report, it stated that in 2007 the Electoral Commission of Kenya (ECK) mismanaged the election and completely bungled the vote tally. The report recommended that “the commission be radically reformed or replaced, with a new name, image and ethos, composed of a lean policy making and supervisory board, selected in a transparent and inclusive process.”

On December 16, Kenya’s Parliament disband-

ed the ECK and chose 27 members for a Parliamentary Select Committee, which will spearhead efforts towards adoption of a new constitution. Their first action will be to choose nine members of an Interim Independent Electoral Commission (IIEC) to not only replace the discredited former ECK, but also instill confidence in Kenyans regarding the constitutional review process and referendum. They will also oversee implementation of the 12-point electoral reform plan recommended by the Kriegler Report.

Among points recommended by this report are creating a new register of voters, adoption of a new electoral system, legislating a fixed date for elections, establishing an Electoral Dispute Resolution Court, enacting anti-hate speech legislation, enacting an elections law which will consolidate all laws on elections, and enacting an Electoral Commission Act which will set out the functions, management and structure of the new ECK. It will also create a permanent observer group which will review management of the ECK.

The second, more volatile report was issued in mid-October by the Commission of Inquiry into the Post-Election Violence, chaired by Justice Philip Nyamu Waki. At 529 pages, it was a scathing indictment of Kenya’s political culture of impunity and endemic violence. After four months of touring the places where violence erupted and interviewing hundreds of witnesses, the Waki Commission found the following, as listed by Africa Focus:

- The initial violence was a spontaneous reaction to the elections results, and was targeted primarily at government property and not intended to injure people.

- After that, the violence took on a more organized form. Politicians and businesspeople organized and planned attacks, armed tribal militias, and targeted people of other ethnic groups.
- The police's failure to act on intelligence, to be impartial and professional, as well as to respond appropriately only made matters worse. Police used excessive force and there was a discernible breakdown in the chain of command.
- Gunshots accounted for 36 percent of all deaths, the most frequent cause. Police were found to be responsible for all gunshot deaths.
- The police response was uneven and was far more brutal in Nyanza and Western provinces.
- Individual and gang rapes, and genital mutilation, of both men and women, were rampant. Police told the Commission that there was no sexual violence, however it was found that General Service Unit, regular and administration police all took part in rapes, including gang rapes. Women bore the brunt of the violence.
- Government security organizations, such as the National Security Intelligence Service and the Commissioner of Police, are implicated in the violence.
- Most significantly, the Waki Commission gave

Kofi Annan the names of six Cabinet ministers, five other members of Parliament, and many businesspeople and others, who are alleged to have organized the violence. Names have been kept secret, but if the Kenyan government does not enact a Tribunal to bring the perpetrators to justice by March 1, 2009, then Annan will hand the names over to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague to be tried there.

In October, a number of politicians, and especially Minister of Agriculture William Ruto, scorned and rejected the report. However, by mid-December, due to pressure from civil rights organizations, diplomats, leaders of all religious faiths and the Kenyan populace in general, both Parliament and the Cabinet unanimously accepted the necessity of implementing the Waki Report.

Kenya's Catholic bishops said that these reports "have simply brought home to us the gravity of our situation. Kenya is at a crossroads. We can take the opportunity that these reports provide to confront the 'culture of impunity,' or degenerate into further crises, ineptitude and moral stagnation. Consequently, we support the implementation of these reports."

DR Congo: Unmitigated tragedy

A recent article in Swiss Info (www.swissinfo.ch) asserts that "[t]he tragedy of the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire, is its underground wealth, abundant in strategic minerals – copper, cobalt, gold, diamonds, uranium, coltan, and cassiterites (tinstone) – which are motivating the greed of all the industrial powers, including China. The commandeering of coltan in particular, whose open-pit mines are located in Kivu province, is at the heart of the conflict which is once again tearing this region apart. ... Coltan, when refined, produces the metal tantalum, widely used in the leading edge technologies, especially in the manufacture of mobile phones, game consoles, portable computers, and even in nuclear reactors." In the following article, the International Crisis Group describes the situation in the DRC, a crisis to which we are all disturbingly close.

There was cautious optimism for peace in North Kivu after the "Goma agreement" was signed

on January 23, 2008. The agreement and the resulting "Amani" peace process, an attempt by the Congolese government to create an inclusive and consultative framework to consolidate peace in the Kivus, followed negotiations between the government, renegade Gen. Laurent Nkunda and Mai Mai militias to end fighting that had resumed in the region from December 2006. The Goma agreement provided for a ceasefire, the withdrawal of troops from key areas and creation of a program for the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of combatants into civilian life or the national army (FARDC).

But implementation quickly fell through. After frequent clashes in the first half of 2008, violence again engulfed the region from late August, when Nkunda's CNDP rebels launched a fresh offensive on army bases and areas under the formal protection of UN troops. ... For a short time, UN peacekeeping troops found themselves the last protection against Nkunda's advances on Goma. An October

29 ceasefire soon faltered, and clashes ... continued throughout November. Partially due to an intense diplomatic effort, Nkunda put on hold his offensive on the city, while still continuing and consolidating advances in other areas.

The humanitarian costs of the violence have been catastrophic. Over 300,000 have been newly displaced since fighting resumed and the Congolese army has been implicated in looting, rapes and killings in and around Goma as troops abandoned their positions. MONUC, the UN peacekeeping force, though 17,000-strong and the biggest of all UN missions, has shown itself unprepared and unable to respond to the unfolding crisis and fulfill its mandate to protect civilians.

Despite Nkunda's claim to be fighting to protect North Kivu's ethnic Tutsi population, all civilians have suffered terribly in the recent violence, with reports of direct CNDP attacks on IDP camps and renewed child recruitment. Nkunda has increasingly declared his ambition to transform his movement into a nation-wide struggle.

Events have produced a serious resurgence in tensions with Rwanda over its continued support for rebel groups Antagonism has been fueled on all sides by the desire for access and control over eastern Congo's significant mineral reserves

As violence continues the risks of a further escalation of the conflict are high. After several unsuccessful efforts to impose a military solution to rebel activity in Congo's east, the international community must now apply heavy pressure on Kinshasa and Kigali to find a comprehensive political approach that will give momentum to both the Amani and Nairobi processes. Renewed commitment is essential to prevent even more devastating humanitarian consequences.

The problems in North Kivu stem from failures of the Congo peace process on army integration, economic governance and transitional justice. President Kabila's legitimate election in November 2006 closed an important chapter of Congo's transition, a process that had started in December 2002 with the signing of the Sun City agreement to end a devastating five-year war that ultimately drew in eight neighboring states....

A deal concluded between Kabila and Nkunda providing for the integration of Nkunda's troops into the armed forces – known as mixage – collapsed in 2007 amid opposition from hardliners on both sides....[leaving] Nkunda militarily strengthened and removed a viable alternative to continued struggle. The illegal exploitation of natural resources continued unabated, fueled by deep resentments over land security and mass human rights abuses. ...

Recent developments have also underscored the fragility of the situation in Ituri. October 2008 saw fresh clashes between government and rebel forces as well as a series of brutal attacks and abductions reportedly by Ugandan Lord's Resistance Army rebels. The risk of renewed violence in the north east region has been limited by the presence of UN troops, the dismantling of the majority of armed groups and the local population's war weariness. However, the root causes of the conflict – including unequal access to land and unfair sharing of revenues from natural resource exploitation – persist, while the emergence of new sources of insecurity pose serious threats to the region's reconstruction. ...

For additional information on the role of mining in the ongoing conflict see Swiss Info at www.swissinfo.ch and several excellent documents from the International Peace Information Service at www.ipisresearch.be.

Zimbabwe: Tracking the descent

A power-sharing deal brokered by South African President Thabo Mbeki, appointed as negotiator by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and signed in September was heralded as a new dawn for Zimbabwe. Instead, it has become a marker for Zimbabwe's rapid descent into collapse. This account of deepening trouble is from a chronology prepared by the Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN, 12/11/08).

Since September, an already disastrous humanitarian situation in Zimbabwe has worsened. Word has spread around the world of water shortages and sanitation failures; of acute food shortages (Save the Children warned that many children were being forced to eat poisonous roots and rats to stave off hunger); of dreaded diseases including anthrax and especially cholera spreading within and beyond Zimbabwe's borders; of a failed health care system

unable to obtain basic medicines or needed supplies; of basic education ground to a halt.

By early November the political situation remained at an impasse and Human Rights Watch reported that 163 people had been killed in political violence. President Robert Mugabe announced he would form a new government, which the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai, refused to join. A new wave of attacks was launched on the MDC as ZANU-PF torture camps were set up around the country. The MDC officially withdrew from the power-sharing deal, but on November 20, Zimbabwe announced a new round of talks.

Two days later, the Elders -- former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, human rights advocate Graça Machel -- part of a group of distinguished people working for peace and human rights, were banned from entering Zimbabwe on a humanitarian mission. Unable to travel into Zimbabwe itself, they held meetings over three days in South Africa. On the basis of those discussions, the Elders expressed their view that there is a major underreported humanitarian crisis in Zimbabwe -- and that conditions are deteriorating at an alarming rate. What also became clear to the Elders was that "Zimbabwe's knowledge base and infrastructure are recoverable; the crisis can be turned around with sound political leadership, economic reform and sufficient regional and international support."

Meanwhile, warnings of a cholera catastrophe began to spread. Many with cholera were forced across the border into South Africa because medical facilities in Zimbabwe were unable to cope. Anthrax claimed the lives of villagers and about 200 livestock north of Bulawayo. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) warned of an alarming spread of cholera throughout the region; over 9,000 were infected in Zimbabwe and numbers were rising in the neighboring countries of South Africa and Botswana. On December 3, the Limpopo River, on the border between South Africa and Zimbabwe, tested positive for cholera. The UN reported 565 cholera deaths and over 12,000 infected in Zimbabwe and the cholera epidemic was expected to worsen as the rainy season began. Finally, on December 4, the Zimbabwean government announced a national emergency and appealed to the international community for aid to help tackle the epidemic. UNICEF announced it would need US\$17.5 million

to tackle the cholera epidemic. By December 10, the number of cholera deaths in Zimbabwe had risen to 746, with 15,572 people infected.

But the political drama went on. In November Gideon Gono was appointed for another five-year term as governor of Zimbabwe's Reserve Bank. Botswana closed its embassy in Harare and the European Union extended the travel ban to 11 more officials and put pressure on Mugabe to step down.

Human rights violations regained international attention with the abduction of activist and journalist Jestina Mukoko, director of Zimbabwe Peace Project. Mukoko was taken at gunpoint from her home in Norton, about 20 miles north of Harare, in a pre-dawn raid by 15 men in plain clothes. Weeks earlier, a group of 15 MDC activists were taken from their homes 60 miles north of Harare -- they have not been heard from since -- and Tsvangirai's director of security, Chris Dlamini, was seized from his home by a group of men, believed by many to be police out of uniform. Gandhi Mudzingwa, former personal assistant to Tsvangirai, was abducted a few days after Mukoko. Mudzingwa's car was forced off the road and he was taken to a waiting vehicle by nine men, bringing to almost 30 the number of MDC supporters and civil society activists abducted and missing in recent weeks.

Faith in action:

Write to your member of Congress encouraging his or her support for the actions recommended by the Elders, including

- Immediately provide \$140 million to the World Food Program (WFP) to maintain its planned food assistance program in the coming months;
- Fund the Consolidated Appeal of \$550 million launched by 35 humanitarian agencies operating in Zimbabwe to address urgent needs;
- Consider offering special assistance to medical and teaching staff to return to work so that services can be resumed;
- Encourage WFP and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to explore a "Home-Grown Help" initiative to provide seed and fertilizer to farmers for the 2009-10 growing season and potentially sell produce to WFP programs;
- Provide sufficient funding for the implementation of a Zimbabwe-led comprehensive development program as soon as a power-sharing government is in place and macro-economic policy changes are underway.

Asia: Financial crisis threatens deeper poverty

Neither the richest nor the poorest Asian economies are immune from the worldwide financial meltdown. The economic crisis threatens to spark social unrest in China, Asia's largest economy, and to drive millions of poor Burmese and Nepalese even deeper into poverty.

China's urban unemployment rate is officially four percent, but one researcher says the true figure could be three times higher. Considering the large proportion of people employed outside of the official economy, Zhou Tianyong estimates unemployment in the cities at about 12 percent.

Zhou, a researcher at the Central School of the Communist Party in Beijing, said in December about a third of China's small- and medium-sized businesses had to close or suspend production in 2008, and larger firms were not hiring. Those hardest hit are the tens of millions of migrants who, without work, must return to the poverty of China's rural areas.

Although the country's GDP has grown more than tenfold since 1978, Zhou says real unemployment has been increasing each year. He says unless the country's leaders create more jobs, "the redistribution of wealth through theft and robbery could dramatically increase, and menaces to social stability will grow."

Zhou says unemployment could rise to 14 percent in 2009, when China's economic growth is expected to fall to 7.5 percent, compared with nine percent in the third quarter of 2008.

In Burma, Prime Minister Gen. Thein Sein said the global financial crisis was "irrelevant" to the country's economy. On Dec. 2, he said the agriculture, forestry and fishing industries could absorb Burma's millions of workers abroad if they were forced to return home.

However, an exiled labor rights activist in Thailand quickly disagreed. "It is a groundless statement," said Moe Swe, head of the Yaung Chi Oo Burmese Workers Association. "If there are plenty of jobs for people in Burma, why have millions left Burma to work abroad?" He estimated four million Burmese are working outside, mostly in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and South Korea.

Aung Thu Nyein, a Burmese economic analyst based in Thailand, said the loss of jobs by migrant workers – with the interruption of their remittances

from abroad – would have a severe impact on Burma's domestic economy.

Tay Za, one of Burma's richest businessmen, reportedly told senior executives of his Htoo Trading Co. Ltd. on Dec. 3 the global recession was severely affecting the country's business climate. He estimated GDP could drop by a quarter in 2008 due to falling demand for Burma's main exports: natural gas, forest products, minerals, seafood and agricultural products. Tay Za's business interests include logging, tourism, hotels, air transport and construction.

Burma's economic growth results largely from its natural gas exports, which account for more than half of its export receipts and foreign direct investment. In the last quarter of 2008 the price of oil and natural gas fell more than 50 percent as demand shrank in response to expectations of a prolonged recession.

In Nepal, the Maoists, who helped bring the country's monarchy to an end and usher in a republic in May 2008, say the country's backwardness has provided some protection from the international financial crisis. The country has "very few links with the global economy and the whole imperialist system" and appears to have escaped the impact of the global turmoil so far, says Finance Minister Baburam Bhattarai. However, he said Dec. 7 he was not sure the nation would be so fortunate in the coming months.

"What's happening is a long-brewing crisis within the whole monopoly capitalist system. This is nothing surprising," he added. "Monopoly capitalism is not sustainable, as it leads to unequal development. Capitalism is failing [and is now a] very ailing patient."

Nepal is one of the world's poorest countries, with around 80 percent of its people dependent on agriculture for a living. It relies on foreign aid for nearly 60 percent of its budget, and is aided by remittances from two million Nepalese working abroad.

"We can't yet see the effects of this crisis because our remittances mostly come from oil-rich Gulf countries, and there's not yet much of a downturn there," Bhattarai said. He added that, with the slowdown that is now starting to grip Gulf nations, that picture could change – and Nepal's fortunes with it.

Burma: World leaders press UN to intervene

As Burma's military government meted out 65-year prison terms in December to 14 nonviolent dissidents, scores of former world leaders urged the UN to press for free and fair elections and for the release of Burma's political prisoners.

“[S]ooner or later there will be a change in Burma,” says former Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik. “I have no doubt at all. It’s only a question of time.”

Bondevik was one of 112 leaders from 50 nations who signed a letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon Dec. 3. They urged him to visit Burma before the year was out and press the regime to release all of its political prisoners. Ban – who has seen little progress in Burma since his last visit in May – declined, saying he would not make the trip until there was a greater likelihood of success.

Even a visit to press the junta on its political prisoners “is only the first step in the process towards democracy in the country,” Bondevik says. “The next step should be, of course, a real dialogue between the democratic movement, the ethnic groups and the junta, and a new writing of the constitution and elections which must be based on a free and fair platform towards full democracy.”

The junta held a referendum on a new constitution in May 2008 in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis. The generals claimed the constitution won 92 percent approval and have scheduled elections in 2010. Meanwhile, Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi remains in the junta’s custody. She has spent more than 12 of the past 19 years in detention, mostly under house arrest. Her National League for Democracy won a sweeping victory in 1990 elections, but the winners were not allowed to take office.

“[A]n election now, under these conditions, will not be free and fair because they have made a constitution without engaging and involving the democratic movement,” Bondevik says. “They have called an election but excluded some very important people from running in the election, among them Aung San Suu Kyi... An election must come after a democratic process where all the main players are included.”

“I hope that [Ban] will have acceptable conditions for going to the country as soon as possible,”

he adds.

The letter to Ban calls for action on Burma by the UN Security Council, whose members China and Russia vetoed an earlier resolution on Burma. “We must ... have a dialogue with these key countries in order to convince them that we need a stronger message from the UN,” Bondevik says, adding that he plans to bring the matter up with China during a visit in 2009.

“[I]t is in the interest of China, and also of countries like India and Russia, to have a development in Burma towards democracy,” he says, “because it’s also a problem for China that you have this situation in a neighboring country like Burma.”

Leaders who signed the letter include Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, John Howard of Australia, Corazon Aquino of the Philippines, Lech Walesa of Poland, Mikhail Gorbachev of Russia, Chandrika Kumaratunga of Sri Lanka and the UK’s Tony Blair, John Major and Margaret Thatcher.

The UN estimates at least 31 people were killed when the army fired on peaceful protesters Sept. 26-27, 2007, during the so-called Saffron Revolution, sparking global outrage.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) says more than 70 political activists, monks, nuns, journalists and labor activists who participated in the demonstrations were tried or summarily convicted in December in secret trials and closed court hearings. Besides the 14 defendants who drew 65-year terms, the regime sentenced 25 others to up to 26 years’ imprisonment.

Even family members often were not permitted to attend the trials, HRW says. In some cases legal representation was denied, and four defense lawyers were sent to prison for contempt when they protested unfair hearings or tried to withdraw their representation at their clients’ request.

According to the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners – Burma (AAPP), nearly 1,100 dissidents were detained after the 2007 anti-government protests, which were the largest the country had seen in nearly two decades. Hundreds have been sentenced, and many have been transferred to remote prisons, AAPP says. The junta, led by Gen. Than Shwe, is thought to be holding more than 2,000 political prisoners, including nearly 200 women.

Indonesia: Obama should press for human rights

Indonesia President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono sees the projection of U.S. soft power, including diplomacy and cultural exchanges, as “the key to world peace” in this century. He also says he is grateful for U.S. educational assistance, an increase in bilateral trade and direct U.S. investment ... and lifting the U.S. arms embargo. However, if Yudhoyono’s Indonesia is truly “a shining example where democracy, Islam and modernity thrive together,” the government should put its military under civilian control, bar indicted military personnel from running for high office, and end impunity for the military for crimes against humanity and other human rights violations.

The *Wall Street Journal* said recently President-elect Barack Obama should rein in liberal senators and interest groups that oppose U.S. military aid for countries with poor human rights records, such as Indonesia. Such groups include Amnesty International and the New York-based East Timor and Indonesia Action Network (ETAN).

The *Journal* says ties between the Pentagon and Indonesia’s military help the U.S. develop relationships with officers who lead the military of “the world’s largest Muslim-majority democracy.” It concedes Indonesia has had human rights problems in the past, but it says “since the downfall of President Suharto in 1998, the Indonesian military has made progress on the humanitarian front.”

However, ETAN director John Miller says Indonesia’s human rights problems were greatest when the U.S. was most engaged with the Indonesian military. He notes General Suharto took power in a 1965 coup in which up to a million persons died. Indonesia seized West Papua in 1963 and invaded East Timor in 1975. Ninety percent of the weapons used in the invasion and subsequent occupation came from the U.S.

“The only period of significant reform came during the period when the U.S. actually suspended much assistance during the 1990s,” Miller says. Changes included Suharto’s downfall, and East Timor’s independence in 2002. “But since the U.S. began to incrementally reinstate military assistance in 2002, the reform process has stalled,” he says.

Miller says re-engagement has failed to end the widespread impunity enjoyed by Indonesia’s security forces for crimes against humanity and other serious

violations in Indonesia and East Timor. He says the military continues to influence civil administration and politics, commerce, and justice down to the village level. He also says the military remains involved in illegal enterprises including logging and the narcotics trade.

More ominously, he adds, the Indonesian military tolerates and continues to back militias and vigilante groups that intimidate civilians, particularly those in ethnic, religious and political minorities. For instance, he says this year the Indonesian government punished Papuan people who protested for self-determination and a greater voice, with harsh reprisals including torture and long prison terms.

Miller says several retired generals who were responsible for some of the worst atrocities in East Timor are serious candidates for president in next year’s elections. For example, General Wiranto, who placed third in the 2004 presidential campaign, was indicted by a UN-sponsored court in East Timor for crimes against humanity during the UN-organized referendum on independence.

Yudhoyono, who spoke Nov. 14 in Washington, D.C., says energy security, threat of a food shortage, global warming and the credit crisis “are all ticking time bombs that require urgent action.” He cautions that “[n]one of these global challenges can be addressed by the world community without having America on board. And conversely, none of these issues can be resolved by the United States alone.”

Yudhoyono speaks for many U.S. policymakers of late when he says “we did not know” when we were facing the climate crisis that the oil crisis was waiting, and the food shortage, and the financial crisis. However, true leaders should no longer be surprised if excessive greenhouse gases trigger climate change and, ultimately, food shortages. Similarly, the oil crisis and financial crisis were triggered by human shortsightedness and greed. These are not, in Yudhoyono’s words, an unforeseen “demon ... waiting in ambush.”

The U.S. is trying to reach out to the Muslim world, and Indonesia has the world’s largest Muslim population. If Barack Obama can craft a policy to effectively address the crises in energy, food, global warming and credit – with a strong human rights component – it would truly be a baraka, or blessing, to be shared with our Southeast Asian ally of 238 million.

Middle East: Nobel winner, activist urge peace

Nobel Peace Prize winner Martti Ahtisaari and Israeli peace activist Jeff Halper recently urged a strong commitment from President-elect Barack Obama to Middle East peace negotiations, to help facilitate a just and lasting settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“I hope that the new president of the United States ... will give high priority to the Middle East conflict during his first year in office,” said Ahtisaari, former president of Finland. He said the European Union, Russia and the UN must also be seriously committed to seeking peace.

Accepting his Nobel Prize on Dec. 10 in Oslo, Ahtisaari said he disagreed with people who believe religious tensions are responsible for the Middle East crisis. “Religions themselves are peace-loving,” he said. “They can also be a constructive force in peace-building, and this also applies to the Middle East.”

“The credibility of the whole international community is at stake,” he said. “We cannot go on, year after year, simply pretending to do something to help the situation in the Middle East. We must also get results.”

Ahtisaari called for engaging women in all stages of peace processes. He also said the growing economic disparity in countries and the world is a potential cause of conflict, adding, “I believe [the] fight against poverty is also the most effective measure of countering terrorism in the long term.”

Writing Dec. 10 in the *Washington Post*, Halper – head of the Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (<http://www.icahd.org>) – said defining the essential elements of a peace settlement should be the final step, not the first, of the process.

Halper says the notion of a shared Jerusalem as the capital of two states is a step forward. However, he notes that Israel has already annexed Palestinian East Jerusalem and plans to annex still more for a so-called “Greater Jerusalem.” This, he says, would isolate Palestinians in the city from the West Bank and deprive a Palestinian state of crucial economic and political resources. He adds, “Jerusalem should not only be shared, but it must be wholly integrated into the political, economic, social and cultural



fabric of the Palestinian state, not simply accessible from a few bus routes.”

An Israeli withdrawal to 1967 borders with “minor, reciprocal” modifications might not satisfy Palestinian demands, either, Halper says. He explains the 1967 annexation of East Jerusalem represents only a “minor” adjustment of about one percent to the 1967 borders. He also asks, “Is the exchange of 10 percent of West Bank land containing East Jerusalem, the settlement blocs, some of Palestine’s richest agricultural lands and its water resources for an equivalent amount of land in the Negev desert truly ‘reciprocal?’”

Halper also says offering to compensate Palestinians for homesteads they lost in 1948, while denying them the right of return, is destined to fail because it ignores the principle of justice. “[A]s Jews well know, victims of an injustice on the scale of the Nakba require more than merely compensation, ...” he says. “Victims need the injustice they suffered to be acknowledged if the wounds are to heal and reconciliation take place.”

As president, Obama could be instrumental in bringing Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations to a successful conclusion, Halper says. However, he must first make clear that ending the occupation and establishing a truly sovereign and viable Palestinian state next to a secure state of Israel is in the best interests of the U.S. The peace process must also be framed amid overarching principles of justice. Only then, Halper believes, should specific elements of a peace settlement be identified.

Ahtisaari would agree the conflict is not an intractable problem. “If we work together, we can find solutions. We should not accept any excuses from those in power,” he says. “All crises, including the one in the Middle East, can be resolved. ... Peace is a question of will.”

Faith in action:

Sign an ecumenical letter found on Churches for Middle East Peace’s website, www.cmep.org, urging President-elect Obama to make Israeli-Palestinian peace an immediate priority of his administration. The deadline for signatures is Jan. 16.

Venezuela: Democracy continues to thrive

Despite the New York Times' portrayal as a "stinging defeat," the regional elections in Venezuela on November 23 showed that President Chavez and his PSUV party continue to hold the favor of the majority of the population. A recently released report from Latinobarometro, a well-respected polling organization, shows that among Latin Americans, Venezuelans continue to be some of the most satisfied with the functioning of their democracy. It is becoming obvious to more and more observers that the Chavez government is far more democratic than it is portrayed to be by much of the mainstream media. The 2008 election was the 11th since Chavez' election in 1998, as contrasted to only 15 national elections and referenda in the previous 40 years.

Turnout in the regional election was a record-setting 65.5 percent, the result of an intensive voter registration campaign that has increased registered voters by 64 percent since 1998. Additionally, the opposition did not boycott the elections as in 2004.

Chavez's PSUV party and its allies won 17 of 22 governor races (an increase of two) and 80 percent of the mayoral races. In the five states where opposition governors won, PSUV and allies still control the majority of city governments. In addition to taking a large majority of positions, the PSUV and allies won their races by far wider margins than oppositional parties. Opposition candidates won by margins of just 10 percentage points or less in four of those states (as low as 1.3 percent in Tachira and three percent in Carabobo), and won by 15 percentage points in the fifth state (Nueva Esparta). In contrast, candidates supporting the government won by roughly 50 percentage points in two states, 30 percentage points in five states, 20 percentage points in four states, and five to 10 percent in six more states.

In Caracas, mayoral opposition candidate Antonio Ledezma won with a strong 52.4 percent of the vote. Yet even here, PSUV candidate Jorge Rodriguez won the mayoral vote in Libertador, the largest district in Caracas and home to two thirds of the city's population (1.7 million), by over 12 percentage points.

This was the first election since the system un-

derwent significant improvements aimed at increasing voter turnout, such as a greater number of voting stations in poor neighborhoods, and was the first time that laws requiring gender balance in candidates were in force. While in 2005, almost 27 percent of candidates were women (an increase from less than 11 percent in 2000 and better than most of Latin America), new election rules mandate that all political parties have an equal number of male and female candidates. Additionally, they must list them in an alternating fashion so that women are not placed at the end which minimizes their chances of being elected. As a result, the list of candidates was 49.75 percent female and 50.25 percent male, in contrast to the 2004 regional elections where 82 percent of the candidates were men.

Despite reports from U.S. news sources, most Venezuelans feel as if their country has never been so democratic. The polling group Latinobarometro's 2008 report shows tremendous support for democracy among the Venezuelan people.

Eighty percent of Venezuelans said that the most effective way to bring about change is "to vote for those who defend my positions." This was by far the highest percentage in Latin America, where an average of 59 percent of the population agrees that voting can effect change. In 1998, before Chavez was first elected, 37 percent of Latin Americans were satisfied with democracy as a way to achieve social change, with only 35 percent of Venezuelans agreeing.

While Venezuelan democracy is not perfect, ample evidence shows that Venezuelans support the idea of democracy and its implementation in their country. In almost every question regarding democracy in the Latinobarometro report, Venezuelans were in the top half of Latin American countries in terms of satisfaction, many times in the top four. While this is true, Chavez should take notice that only 48 percent approve of his government, compared to 52 percent of Latin Americans. While these numbers may indicate that the Chavez government needs to improve public safety, which was the top issue for most Venezuelans in this election, they in no way indicate that his government is a dictatorship in any way as some in the mainstream media persist in claiming.



Andean region: “Living well”

In recent years, indigenous peoples of the Andean region have joined together to provide an incredible example of self-organizing, forming concrete proposals and achieving the political power to implement those proposals.

In 2006, several indigenous organizations formed the Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas (CAOI, or Andean Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations), which has actively formed unity among and between the various indigenous communities in Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Chile and Argentina.

At a presentation at the Americas Social Forum in October 2008, Roberto Espinoza, a coordinator of the coalition, presented the common vision of *sumak kawsay* (Quechua for living well), or living with harmony between people and Earth. He said that there is a growing unity behind these proposals and they are successfully implementing parts in different countries, especially Bolivia and Ecuador. He listed key aspects of “living well”:

- Any project that will affect the lives of a community must first obtain the free, prior and informed consent of that community. The current situation of transnational corporations being given rights from governments to exploit land without notifying local communities must stop.
- The precautionary principle, which maintains the right of communities and governments to refuse the use of a new technology or product until it has been scientifically proven to be safe, must continue to be upheld. With this, the burden of proof falls on those presenting the new product. Many bilateral and multilateral trade agreements reverse the logic of this principle, making it governments’ responsibility to first scientifically prove that a product or technology is unsafe in order to ban, or limit, its use.
- The concept of reciprocity should be better developed and used. Communities should encourage joint work projects, mutual help exchanges, bartering boards and other forms of exchange between people that do not require money.
- Natural resources should not be commoditized.
- Knowledge should be decolonized. Patents and copyrights that restrict access to and use of ideas are counterproductive and illogical. No one “owns” an idea. All ideas are based on previous

knowledge and therefore cannot be claimed as the product of one person or corporation. Numerous alternative methods for assuring the production of new ideas already exist and should be used. See www.cepr.net for more details on alternatives to patents.

- Humanity needs to change its aim from creating a globalized economy to creating a multitude of localized economies where the production and consumption of goods, especially food, will take place in the same area. Local economies are more responsive to average citizens while a global economy can only be influenced by huge power blocs.
- Water should be considered a human right. No business should be able to deny basic amounts of water to anyone and governments have an important role in guaranteeing universal access to water.
- We need to deepen spiritualities that link humans with the Earth and that instill a sense of awe and respect for the Earth and all the living communities in it.

Espinoza continued with two concrete political proposals that the different Andean indigenous communities are trying to implement in their respective countries: the plurinational state and autonomy.

The newly approved constitution of Ecuador and soon to be approved constitution of Bolivia both contain this concept, which “allows for governments and institutions to be as diverse as the people in the country.” It includes both collective and individual rights and aims to socialize power, decentralizing it to community levels. Espinoza related the skepticism many indigenous communities have for political parties. They aim to create structures that will bring about a more direct democracy than representative democracy.

Connected to plurinationalism is the implementation of various types of autonomies. Bolivia and Ecuador are beginning to codify autonomous governing structures at regional, indigenous, state and even neighborhood levels.

Benita Simón, a Maya delegate from Guatemala, summed up well what *sumak kawsay* means when she said, “Good living for us is also taking the position of moving from actions of resistance to actions that allow us to take back power.”

Ecuador: Default shows need for debt mechanism

On December 12, Ecuadoran President Rafael Correa announced a default on Ecuador's 2012 global bonds worth a total of about \$3.8 billion. This momentous decision was based on the recent conclusion of an independent Public Debt Audit Commission that between 1976 and 2006, much of Ecuador's debt was illegally contracted and that the debt process benefited the financial sector and transnational corporations to the detriment of the citizens of Ecuador.

Next steps in what will undoubtedly be a contentious process are likely to include lawsuits and attachment of assets by angry bondholders, renegotiation of defaulted bonds, a possible drop in foreign and domestic investment, limited multilateral credit and long term difficulties issuing new debt in international markets.

In a briefing paper on Ecuador's default, the Jubilee USA Network points out that the current global financial crisis and the third world debt crisis share similar roots in reckless and irresponsible lending. Ecuador, like so many other countries in the global South, has been negatively impacted by the so-called "third world" debt crisis for years and is now beginning to feel the consequences of the current financial crisis.

The origins of Ecuador's debt date to the period between 1976-1982, when, under the dictatorship of the Supreme Government Council, Ecuador contracted \$3.4 billion in debt. Of this, nearly two-thirds was used to finance military expenditures. After multiple reschedulings, conversions and further borrowing, Ecuador's external debt has risen to more than \$14 billion despite the fact that Ecuador has more than repaid the principal it borrowed plus significant interest and penalties. In 2007, Ecuador paid \$1.75 billion in debt service, more than the government spent on health care, social well-being, housing and urban development, and the environment combined. As part of its plan to fight poverty, the Ecuadorian government made a public commitment to reverse this situation by 2010, seeking to significantly increase its spending on social services while cutting the amount it pays on debt service.

In this context the government of Ecuador es-

tablished the independent Public Debt Audit Commission in July 2007 to examine the origins, nature, and impacts of the country's sovereign debt. The commission completed a report in September 2008 which documents claims of irregularities and illegitimacy in the contracting of Ecuador's public debt.

The commission was created by Presidential Decree No. 472 in July 2007 to audit the external and internal debt contracted by Ecuador with international banks, multilateral organizations and bilateral creditors between 1976 and 2006. In fulfilling their mandate, members of the commission confronted enormous difficulties due to the lack of transparency and behind the scenes dealings in the contracting of agreements with the multilateral financial system and the national and foreign private sector. They encountered archives in disarray and stored in inadequate, humid places, as well as incomplete documentation.

Nevertheless, the commission made important findings that confirm allegations of illegitimacy and illegality in relation to Ecuador's public debt and demonstrated that the debt was used as an instrument by international creditors to extract Ecuador's economic and environmental resources, damage Ecuador's sovereignty and contribute to the deinstitutionalization of the State.

Creditors, in collaboration with the government, imposed conditions that had serious economic, social, and environmental impacts. Since the 1980s, a high percentage of the national budget was used to service the public debt, seriously shortchanging budgets for education, nutrition, health care and social programs. Only 14 percent of all the loans were invested in social projects, such as potable water, electricity, telecommunications and roadways. Eighty six percent of the loans were used to pay debts.

For 30 years, state officials signed whatever agreements creditors offered, in the process violating general principles of law (such as good faith, the free determination of peoples, the prohibition of usury, contractual balance, human rights and environmental rights), international covenants and fundamental norms of domestic law.

In preparation for the Financing for Development Review Conference, which took place in Doha in late November, debt campaigners around the world tried to persuade governments to include ref-



erence to illegitimate debt in the outcome document. Norway took a giant step forward by proposing language referring to the legitimacy of debt. That such language could even be considered by nations of the world makes evident the amazing accomplishments of those, especially in the global South, including Ecuador, who have been working for the cancellation of unjust, overwhelming and illegitimate debt.

As policymakers look for global solutions to the problem of irresponsible lending in the current financial crisis, the case of Ecuador points to an important blind spot: the lack of an international,

independent mechanism for countries to question potentially illegitimate and/or illegal debt or to petition in the case of inability to pay. This vacuum essentially forces a country such as Ecuador, which has found serious issues regarding its debt, into a corner with two possible options: restructuring or default. An independent body should be created to address this issue. While Ecuador is the first developing country during the current crisis to consider default, it is unlikely to be the last given the severity of the global recession.

Special series: Ecological economics, part 1

As humanity faces the reality of climate change and reaches the exhaustion of a number of natural resources, we realize that our economy, which is fundamentally built on the concept of never-ending exponential growth, must drastically change if we are going to live within the confines of the Earth. This series of six articles looks at ecological economics and the idea of a steady state economy that will provide livelihoods while fitting within the footprint of the Earth.

A new economics for a full world

The basic rules that guide conventional economics were created at a time when the world seemed empty, when people could expand into apparently endless lands. Natural resources were abundant and free. Governments were very effective in using up resources to build massive infrastructures and weapons systems, driven by the allure of growing into an apparently limitless world. Yet times are rapidly shifting, and we find ourselves reaching limit after limit in terms of land, water, food, oil, etc. Our full world requires a very different type of economy, an economy that is designed to fit within the physical limits of the Earth, not an economy that imagines that it can grow forever.

Traditional economists downplay or even ignore the ways in which our economy depends on resources and natural systems and instead focus exclusively on the importance of labor and capital in producing goods. One example of this thinking was economist William Nordhaus' statement that global warming would have little impact on the U.S.

because it will only affect agriculture which is only three percent of the gross national product.

Developed in the years preceding World War II, the concepts of gross national product (GNP, the total output of the economy of a region or country) and gross domestic product (GDP, the total output of a region or country), have been the focus of governments ever since. Both measure economic growth and are associated with the measure of wellbeing. Yet, as a measurement, GNP is fundamentally flawed. Numerous studies have shown that self-declared happiness only increases with rising income until basic needs are met. After that, increases in income have little or no effect on happiness. Yet countries in the global North with already high per capita GNPs seek to further increase it in the blind hope that this will make people "happier."

Another enormous flaw in GNP is that it counts the consumption of natural resources as income, instead of an expense, or reduction in capital. If a country extracts non-renewable minerals, it is treated as positive income in GNP measurements, despite the fact that the country is losing irreplaceable natural capital. Businesses must account for depreciation and spending of their human-made capital like trucks and factories, but in the world of conventional economics, GNP treats natural capital as unlimited.

Another serious flaw in calculating the GNP is that it counts as positive defensive spending made to protect ourselves from the unwanted side effects of production and consumption by others. Think of them as "anti-bads" spending rather than goods. They are incurred to counteract the negative effects



of other people's consumption or production. For example, to avoid overcrowding, crime, and air or noise pollution, many people have moved out of cities, bought more cars and spent more on gas. Or, if someone chose to stay in the city, they might have spent money to soundproof their apartment, install air filters, or buy a home security system. Medical expenses and car repairs after a traffic accident are other examples. Even money spent cleaning up toxic waste sites left behind by irresponsible businesses is counted as positive by the GNP. All of these costs should be counted as a cost of production applied to the activity that made them necessary, which would increase the price and reduce the amount of that activity. Instead we treat them as purely voluntary costs and add them to the GNP. These costs expand the economy, but do not increase well being.

A truly illogical aspect of our current economy is how conventional economics treats limited goods (including dwindling natural resources such as water, oil, minerals, fish, etc.) as non-scarce, placing low or no value on these things, while treating abundant goods, such as knowledge, as scarce through our patent and copyright systems. Especially today, when countries around the world need to rapidly adapt to climate change, the free transfer of knowledge is indispensable. The current patent system must be replaced with one that encourages innovation without resulting in prohibitively expensive products.

An area of conventional economics that must fundamentally change is how most governments currently tax "goods" like workers' incomes and

production while not taxing "bads" like resource depletion. Taxes are effective tools for influencing behavior. Years ago, we thought resources were plentiful and endless, so it made sense not to tax resource use. Our current tax structure encourages employers to hire fewer workers and use more energy-intensive and resource-intensive production methods that are taxed less. By not taxing resource use, we send a message that resources can be squandered.

But we now know that resources are in short supply. Governments should change the tax system – which is an effective tool for influencing behavior – by removing taxes that make hiring people more expensive, and by taxing resource usage. Compensations can be made to assure that people with low incomes would not be priced out of basics like heating their houses or basic transportation.

We place "sin taxes" on products like alcohol and cigarettes in an effort to lower their usage. In the same way, we should use taxes to reduce other modern day sins. (Pope Benedict XVI recently declared pollution and excessive wealth to be cardinal sins.) A "sin tax" on pollution and wages above a certain level would be appropriate.

Ecological, or steady state, economics looks at the real world and designs an economic system that would respect the limits of the Earth. The model focuses on the three fundamentals of scale (size of the economy relative to its sustaining ecosystem), distribution of wealth and allocation of resources. We will explore these and other themes in the rest of this series on ecological economics during 2009.

Special series: Corporations in the U.S., part 1

In every area of public policy (foreign affairs, health care, education, trade, ecology, energy, etc.) governmental decisions are heavily influenced by a handful of large corporations. Yet, for the first 100 years of this country, states prohibited corporations from participating in politics and shut down those that did become involved. How then, did corporations become so powerful today? In the first part of this series, we will trace the history of the corporation in the U.S. and examine concrete alternatives to rein in their power and influence.

Founding of an anti-corporate nation

The U.S. Constitution does not mention the word corporation, yet as former Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter said, the history of constitutional law is “the history of the impact of the modern corporation upon the American scene.” Thomas Jefferson warned about the threat of corporations, saying, “I hope we shall crush in its birth the aristocracy of our moneyed corporations which dare already to challenge our government in a trial of strength, and bid defiance to the laws of our country.”



Rarely being portrayed as such, the American Revolution was as much anti-corporation as it was anti-England. Before the revolution, most of the entities that we now know as states were run like corporations chartered by the British government. The Virginia Company and other “pre-states” were granted to individuals and run by their will. The Virginia Company was known for being especially ruthless in its treatment of workers, including children. In an effort to get the Company’s charter revoked, one stockholder in 1664 complained that of the approximately 6,000 adult and child workers who had been sent to the colony since its foundation, an estimated 4,800 had died from overwork and terrible working and living conditions. In *Gangs of America: The Rise of Corporate Power and the Disabling of Democracy*, Ted Nace paints a harrowing description of life in Virginia at the same time that reports to Virginia Company investors and potential workers portrayed a utopia for workers – not too dissimilar from corporate reports today describing their workshops overseas.

The Boston Tea Party was as much a protest against the East India Tea Company as it was against the British crown that was helping to create its monopoly. The company was deeply in debt due to overexpansion and was facing heavy competition from small businessmen in the colonies who were buying tea from Dutch traders and smuggling it in small ships. After pressure from the Tea Company, the British government passed the Tea Act of 1773. Some think the Act only increased the taxes on tea paid by colonists, but it went far beyond that: It exempted the Company from taxes on tea exported to the colonies and even gave a tax refund on the millions of pounds of tea they hadn’t been able to sell. Since the Company didn’t have to pay taxes, it was able to lower its prices and undercut small businesses in the colonies -- much like the experience of Mexico under NAFTA and of small towns in the U.S. trying to stop big box stores like Wal Mart. Thom Hartmann’s *Unequal Protection* quotes original documents from people involved in the Boston Tea Party who sound quite similar to people today struggling against trade agreements, including solidarity protests in England by people affected by the Tea Act there.

When the same merchants who fought the Tea Act and experienced life under the Virginia Company wrote their new Constitution, they were very careful to place strong controls on corporations, in the same way that they wanted to restrict the power of government officials. The chartering of corporations – establishing the existence of corporations and the rules by which they operate – was placed in the hands of state governments, which at the time were the only directly elected bodies. They didn’t want corporations to be able to become so powerful again. For the first 100 years of the new nation, corporations were created to do public works without the direct involvement of the government.

The states, almost unanimously, wrote charters with the following characteristics. First, charters were rarely granted, and only if necessary to serve the common good; the corporation was established for a set period of time ranging from three to 50 years, usually 10 to 20 years; the corporation had a specific purpose (for example, to build two bridges across a river); it was only allowed to own as much land and capital as was necessary to complete its purpose; it could not be involved in politics; it could

not own stock in other corporations; and it was limited to operating only within a state or even county. Some states only chartered banks through direct referendums. Corporations' charters were routinely revoked for breaking any of these, and other, statutes, and the company was divided up among its investors. The idea of the corporation was to serve a public purpose while making an adequate profit for its investors.

So how did we get from there to where we are now, where the tail wags the dog and corporations control government? What can we do now to reestablish popular control over corporations? In NewsNotes during 2009 we will explore these questions, continuing in the next issue with an important 1886 court case that gave corporations much of the power and influence we are dealing with today.

UN: Progress of the world's women

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) recently released "Who answers to women? Gender and accountability: Progress of the world's women 2008/9," which notes that much stronger accountability mechanisms for tracking progress on gender equality are needed in order to meet national and international commitments to women's rights. Accountability to women begins with increasing the number of women in decision-making positions, but it cannot stop there.

Implementation still has a long way to go in translating commitments to women's rights into changes in their lives. To date, women are outnumbered four to one in legislatures around the world; over 60 percent of all unpaid family workers globally are women; women still earn on average 17 percent less than men, and about one-third of women suffer gender-based violence during their life span; one in 10 women dies from pregnancy-related causes, even though the means for preventing maternal mortality are cost-effective and well known.

The progress report provides a clear assessment of each of the Millennium Development Goals from a gender perspective and focuses on five key areas where urgent action is required to strengthen accountability to women: politics and governance, access to public services, economic opportunities, justice, and the distribution of international assistance for development and security. In each of these areas the report details means of building state capacity – or good governance – from a women's rights perspective.



Key findings and recommendations:

- Multilateral aid and security institutions can do much more to meet their own commitments and standards on gender equality. To date, no agreed system-wide tracking mechanism exists within the UN and the international financial institutions, to assess the amount of aid allocated to gender equality or women's empowerment.
- Women continue to face barriers to health, education and agricultural support services.
- One form of accountability failure is corruption, and women's experiences are different from those of men. In developed countries, 30 percent more women than men perceive high levels of corruption in the education system, and a gendered difference in perceptions of corruption are seen in most other parts of the world as well.
- Women are extremely vulnerable to shifting patterns in global markets in the absence of measures that protect them; for instance, in the recent food crisis, they not only assume responsibility for feeding their families, but also contribute as much as 50-80 percent of agricultural labor in Asia and Africa.
- Women's employment and migration are shaped by global trends; the "brain drain" from South to North of people with tertiary education has become feminized. This has implications for women's economic leadership in impoverished countries.

This report carries with it many challenges to be met by multinational institutions, government leaders and individuals so that equality for women in particular, on all levels, can be realized within our lifetime. Read the entire document here: www.unifem.org/progress/2008/publication.html.

Update on International Climate Change Treaty

Without an atmosphere to trap heat, life on earth would perish from the cold. Fortunately, a balance of atmospheric gases keeps the earth's surface temperature at an average of 57° F. However, during the past century the global temperature has risen by one degree; the 10 warmest years on record occurred in the last 15 years. This is undoubtedly due to an accumulation of gases in the earth's atmosphere due to fossil fuel burning, deforestation and population growth and is commonly referred to as the greenhouse effect. This global warming causes atmospheric imbalance resulting in erratic climatic events experienced particularly in prolonged drought, intensifying storms and rising sea levels.

This is the scenario that informs the work of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the overall international treaty that deals with global warming. The Kyoto Protocol to the UNFCCC, which expires in 2012, establishes legally binding commitments for the reduction of particular greenhouse gases produced by industrialized nations, as well as general commitments for all member countries.

Since the UN began its serious work of convincing the world's nations to reduce greenhouse gases, contrary to expectations, the amount of dangerous atmospheric pollution has increased. This is due in part to the industrialization of newly developed and developing countries. However, industrialized nations are also to blame. The U.S., which has not signed on to the Kyoto Protocol, has been particularly resistant to modifying its greenhouse gas output for economic reasons, citing the fact that the Protocol requires more of countries that are long term greenhouse gas emitters (such as the U.S.) than of countries that are developing or are newly developed industrially. This could give newly industrialized countries an economic advantage over the U.S.

The UN is currently working toward a new protocol to succeed the Kyoto Protocol. Ideally, the new protocol will be ready by December 2009 so that it could be ratified by UN member states and be in place when the Kyoto Protocol expires. Besides establishing mandatory greenhouse gas reductions, the new document addresses the increasing demand from non-industrialized nations that they be assisted

financially and technologically to combat the effects of global warming in their states, especially in Least Developed States and in Island Nations. This assistance is fair, as these states are vulnerable to the effects of global warming while they have had practically no part in producing the conditions that cause it.

For instance, Maryknoll Sisters working in the Marshall Islands and on the island of Yap in Micronesia have observed that the coral reef is rapidly deteriorating with the loss of various species of fish and other sea creatures. Soil, which at best is shallow on the islands, is eroding at an alarming rate. Both these losses mean the loss of livelihood for many people.

A meeting of the parties involved in establishing the new protocol was held in December 2008 in Poznan, Poland. Some progress in establishing channels for financial and technological transfers was made at this meeting. However, due to the current global economic crisis, it was difficult to convince developed nations to pledge the large sums of money necessary to undertake measures to mitigate the effects of global warming as well as measures to adapt to the new climate conditions in developing countries.

During the meeting it was evident that the role of the U.S. will be pivotal in the creation and implementation of a treaty that will draw all nations into an agreement that will benefit the whole world. It is hoped that the Obama administration will be proactive in creating the new protocol with all the conditions necessary for stabilizing greenhouse gases during the coming years for the sake of generations to come and for the sake of the entire earth community.



Torture: Time for accountability

Questions concerning the Bush administration's endorsement of "enhanced" interrogation techniques and treatment of detainees have shifted recently from a focus on whether torture happened, and is it wrong, to a question of our response. Reports on possible instances of torture from the Departments of Justice and Defense, along with Congressional committee reports, and accounts gathered by investigative reporters have brought some important information to light, but remain incomplete.

Several human rights organizations, faith based advocacy groups, Congressional leaders, retired military personnel, prosecutors, and legal scholars have joined together to call for a formal commission of inquiry. Gen. Antonio Taguba, who first investigated the interrogation practices at Abu Ghraib, said, "There is no longer any doubt as to whether the current administration has committed war crimes. The only question that remains to be answered is whether those who ordered the use of torture will be held to account."

A failure to pursue accountability could limit U.S. ability to redress damage already done and bear consequences still unseen. A willing disregard of international human rights and humanitarian law has diminished U.S. ability to assume moral authority in international disputes. Unchecked transgressions can easily lead to greater offenses, and set the precedent for future administrations to assume power beyond the limits of the law. Attorney Scott Horton suggests, "Open criminality is a cancer on democracy. It implicates all who know of the conduct and fail to act." An unwillingness to take responsibility for criminal behavior not only sanctions the use of torture, but also sanctions the people's failure to hold their government in account, and causes us to forego our full participation in a democratic system.

A commission of inquiry can expose the truth, and provide a full record, but it is not authorized to minister justice. It can function to educate the public, build political will for resolute change, and secure evidence for further steps toward accountability. Giving voice to the victims can change the emphasis of our historical memory, supporting a moral consensus that such activity will never be tolerated again. The commission would not only produce an in-depth report, but would also provide recommendations, such as what new policies and procedures

need to be assumed. This commission could then lead to the formal recommendation to either offer pardons or pursue prosecution. These recommendations would not be mandatory, but would support further action only if the commissioners successfully made a case for them. Arguably, the only way this would be publicly acceptable is if the commission's fact-finding process was comprehensive, transparent, and non-partisan.

Perspectives vary on how this commission might be structured, the selection process and who might supply the mandate. The National Religious Campaign Against Torture has called for a Select Committee, while others, such as the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) and Human Rights USA are calling for an investigatory commission or "truth commission." President-elect Obama could easily mandate such a commission, or an act of Congress could enable an executive-legislative commission (the most recent example being the 9/11 Commission). In order for the commissioners to command broad respect, they must be tenacious and prioritize the exposure of truth over the politics of those who appointed them. This should bar those with a history of partisan political engagement from appointment. Scott Horton points to the effectiveness of the two-tiered selection process of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He suggests that we should follow their example and create a "qualifications commission" that would create a list of pre-approved candidates, from which the commissioners are chosen. "The experience pool should include prosecutors, intelligence professionals, retired military leaders, religious leaders and ethicists, human-rights advocates, healthcare professionals, and diplomats." It is important that the commission have a clearly defined mandate. The commission must have subpoena power, be able to access classified material in a timely fashion, and even demand declassification of documents. The investigation should be conducted in the public arena, as much as possible, and the records and documents scrutinized by the commission must also be made available to journalists, lawyers and scholars.

A thorough investigation would take a considerable amount of time, and the commission should be given the time it needs to uncover the truth and recommend appropriate action.

Opportunities at UN for incoming president

President-elect Obama's decision to name Susan Rice as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations is seen by UN watchers as an excellent choice. Along with her broad knowledge of foreign policy, Rice is known as an advocate of "dramatic action" against genocide anywhere in the world. Since Rice has been one of Obama's closest advisors, her choice sends a strong signal regarding the level of priority to be given to the UN by the new administration. Following are some of the challenges and opportunities awaiting the new administration.

Currently, the U.S. is \$1.2 billion in arrears in dues owed to the UN. With the new administration in Washington, UN supporters hope that the U.S. will settle this bill immediately. This outstanding bill has a major bearing on the capability of the UN peacebuilding and peacekeeping forces to be present in places of conflict and strife around the world.

The U.S. has insisted upon UN reform in order to ensure that funds put into the UN system are not wasted. Ban Ki-moon, whom the U.S. backed for the position of Secretary General, has vigorously supported and systematically implemented UN reform. While there is still much to be done, this work on the part of the Secretary General needs to be upheld and publicly acknowledged. A widespread campaign designed to elevate the UN to a place of prestige in the minds of U.S. citizens ought to be mounted. This is urgent because the links binding all the nations of the world are increasingly apparent making it clear that international threats ought to be faced and resolved by the United Nations for the peace and security of all people. For this, intelligent U.S. participation and responsible leadership are required.

Other areas of urgent concern are support for a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty against nuclear weapons development, restructuring the International Atomic Energy Agency, creating a treaty to ban the weaponization of space, and bringing about an agency to act as distributor of fissile material.

In addition, it is hoped that the U.S. will ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was signed by President Clinton but never sent to the Senate for ratification due to the perceived hostile attitude of Congress toward the UN. The only other country that has failed to ratify this treaty is Somalia.

In 2006, when the UN replaced the discredited Human Rights Commission with the Human Rights Council, the U.S. opted out of joining the new council. It is hoped that the new administration will promptly reverse this decision in order to be eligible for a seat in the new session, which will open in the spring.

Another treaty signed by President Clinton but never ratified is the treaty creating the International Criminal Court. Since President Bush rescinded the signing of the treaty, it is hoped that President Obama will both sign it and

send it to Congress for ratification at the earliest opportunity. Lastly, it is widely anticipated that the new administration will actively support the successor document to the Kyoto Protocol, setting binding targets for reducing greenhouse gases in industrialized countries that now have a long history of polluting the earth's atmosphere. Hopefully, the U.S. will set the pattern of responsibility so that industrially developing countries will participate according to a schedule of incrementally increasing responsibility.

There is also a call for the reorganization of the Security Council, increasing its membership, and for the reorganization of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. All of these require the support and creative intelligence of the U.S.

Lastly, it is hoped that Obama will bring the youth of the U.S. into the UN by supporting internships and other UN youth oriented activities. As the United States rejoins the world community, model UNs could be set up by youth around the country. The ideas of the youth could be a source of vision and insight for a world united in the pursuit of peace and well-being for all.



Resources

In this time of transition to a new administration and Congress, the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns has joined with colleagues to craft or endorse various policy proposals for in-coming lawmakers. Below is a list of some of the statements we've signed or helped shape:

- 1) The Platform for the Common Good was developed during the election year. It offers a vision of what is entailed to make the U.S. a "more perfect union" and to ensure the common good for all. To read and sign on, go to: <http://www.votethecommongood.com/>
- 2) Transition recommendations were prepared by the Jubilee USA Network for the U.S. Department of Treasury/International Affairs Division on policy towards multilateral development banks and the IMF; poor country debt relief; and sustainable and responsible lending for poor countries: <http://www.jubileeusa.org/transition-recommendations.html>
- 3) "A call to the new president for responsible U.S. global engagement" is a letter from members of the Connect U.S. community to President-Elect Obama calling for the U.S. to fully engage with the international community on important global issues. <http://www.connectusfund.org/node/1587>
- 4) "Forging new ties" is the Washington Office on Latin America's plan for an overhaul of U.S.-Latin America relations; it represents a new vision for this country's relationship with our hemispheric neighbors and demonstrates strategic thinking on a critical area of U.S. policy and gives clear recommendations for the next administration. <http://www.wola.org/>
- 5) Open letter addressing the food crisis explores several policy options endorsed by several groups that comprise the Food Crisis Working Group: <http://www.usfoodcrisisgroup.org/>
- 6) Refugees International coordinated a statement from NGOs on policy toward internally displaced persons: www.refugeesinternational.org
Other statements of note:
 - 1) "Roadmap for peace" is the American Friends Service Committee's statement that calls on the next U.S. president and administration to engage in a new foreign policy based on five core principles. To read and sign on, go to: <http://www.roadmapforpeace.org/>
 - 2) Joe Volk, the Executive Secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation, wrote to President-elect Obama outlining five priorities for peace with justice: http://www.fcnl.org/action/Volk_Obama.htm
 - 3) "A Policy Agenda for the New Administration from Communities of Faith" is a five page statement of policy goals covering selected international peace and development issues and supported by 11 U.S. churches, church agencies and ecumenical organizations – found at: <http://www.churchworldservice.org/>
 - 4) "Presidential Transition Briefs" is Oxfam America's policy options for the Obama administration to address poverty, hunger, and injustice: <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/transition>

African Proverbs Calendar 2009: The website African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories offers a PDF calendar for 2009, available to print out for use as a wall or desk Calendar. Go here to download: <http://www.afriprov.org/>

Enough for All: Seventh Annual Ecumenical Advocacy Days, March 13-16, 2009: The Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns co-hosts this annual gathering of the ecumenical Christian community. This year's theme, "Enough for All," will connect the workshops on climate change, migration and poverty in the U.S. and around the world. Held in Washington, D.C., March 13-16. Conference fee: \$160. Registration after February 13 will be \$175. Scholarships are available. Visit www.advocacydays.org, write info@advocacydays.org or call 202-386-6397 for more information. If you are interested in attending, please let the Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns know: 202-832-1780, ogc@maryknoll.org.