

UNFPA REPORT ON IMMIGRANTS

Western prejudices are largely ill-founded

AFP, Paris

Evidence shows that certain prejudices about immigrants that prevail in the industrialised world are largely ill-founded, the United Nations Population Fund said in its annual report yesterday.

These include complaints that immigrants take locals' jobs, depress wage levels and are a burden on the social welfare system.

"Empirical evidence to support each of these complaints is weak or ambiguous -- at least at the aggregate level," the UNFPA said in its 2006 report on the state of the world population.

It also pointed out that women migrants, who make up nearly 50 percent of the 191 million known migrants worldwide, played a vital

role in financially supporting their families back home and by filling skills gaps in areas such as nursing in the countries to which they moved.

The publication of the report comes amid increasing political debate about undocumented immigrants in Europe and the United States.

In the US, the House of Representatives has passed a bill that beefs up security along its border with Mexico and stiffens legal penalties for illegal immigrants, without finding any way to assimilate the millions of Latin American already living clandestinely in the country.

In the European Union, which is next month to discuss ways to stem the flow of clandestine migrants from Africa, immigration is particu-

larly high on the political agenda in France, Italy and Spain.

France has approved a law encouraging qualified foreign workers, while tightening entrance rules for others and Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has vowed to deport 25,000 undocumented immigrants this year.

The UNFPA said international migration was "a vital part of today's globalised existence" and therefore unlikely to stop. And it pleaded for a balanced approach to immigration by Western governments who might be tempted to pander to xenophobic impulses among their voters.

"Growing interdependence between countries, coupled with widening inequalities, will probably lead to the further intensification of international movements," the report warned.

The UNFPA acknowledged there were dark sides to immigration, including the brain drain of skilled workers from the poorest states, the huge human trafficking industry and the vulnerability of undocumented migrants to exploitation by unscrupulous employers in the West.

It also accepted that immigration could create complex tensions in receiving countries.

But it stressed it had "clear benefits that could be enhanced and disadvantages that could be minimised".

"The US Central Intelligence Agency and ... the European Commission maintain that migration contributes to overall growth, greater productivity and higher employment -- for everyone," it pointed out.

Launch of Atlantis delayed

AFP, Houston

The launch of space shuttle Atlantis has been delayed 24 hours, until today, due to a technical glitch, a NASA spokesman said.

"NASA has scrubbed the launch for 24 hours," a spokesman for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said early yesterday.

One of the three fuel cells providing electricity to the shuttle did not function well, another NASA official said.

The Atlantis' launch on the first International Space Station construction mission since in nearly four years had been scheduled for 12:29am (1629 GMT).

Earlier Wednesday, the fueling of the shuttle's external tank had been delayed for two hours at least when a technical glitch was detected. It takes three hours to fill the tank with almost two million liters of liquid hydrogen and oxygen.

Foul weather last week scuttled three attempts to launch Atlantis on its 11-day mission to the ISS.

Annan pushes 3-step process to lift Israeli blockade of Lebanon

AFP, New York

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan outlined a three-step process he hopes will end with the lifting of Israel's blockade of Lebanon within 48 hours, in an interview with The New York Times published yesterday.

The first step, Annan told the newspaper on his flight from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, was France's agreement in principle Tuesday to a Lebanese request to take part in monitoring the Lebanese coastline.

President Jacques Chirac's office confirmed the agreement, which it said was reached after Annan passed on Lebanon's request in a telephone conver-

sation with Chirac late Monday.

The second step in the plan, Annan said, was having Lebanese Prime Minister Fuad Siniora write him a letter formally authorizing the Germans to take up their positions off Lebanon.

In this regard, the UN chief said there was disagreement over timing between Siniora, who wants the blockade lifted before he authorizes the German deployment, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who wants the Germans officially committed before he lifts the blockade.

Annan said he hoped the temporary presence of French, Italian and Greek ships would

convince Israel that no weapons would be smuggled to the Hezbollah militia if the blockade is lifted.

The third and final step in the plan, said Annan -- who is not quoted directly by the newspaper -- was an Israeli announcement that it will lift the blockade.

Annan's hope was that the three-step process could be completed within 48 hours.

The blockade of Lebanon forms part of UN Resolution 1701 which on August 14 brought to an end a month of conflict between Israel and Hezbollah.

Stop abuse of migrant women

UN appeal to world leaders

AFP, Paris

The United Nations appealed to world leaders yesterday to wake up to the widespread mistreatment of migrant women, a silent human army abused as everything from sex workers to domestic slaves.

"There is an urgent need for stronger cooperation between countries to make migration more safe and fair," said Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, head of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA).

"And there is a dire need for greater action to address the lack of opportunities and human rights violations that lead many women to migrate in the first place," she added.

In its annual report on the state of world population, the UNFPA pointed out that nearly half the world's migrant population of 191 million were women. But the contribution they made to their home and host countries was largely ignored and their needs rarely met.

Human trafficking -- notably including the smuggling of women from poor countries to work as prostitutes in the rich West -- is the

world's third-largest illicit trade after drugs and arms smuggling, the report noted.

Migration can also have damaging consequences in the developing world. The yearly exodus of 20,000 highly qualified nurses and doctors from Africa is worsening an already unprecedented health care crisis in region ravaged by HIV, malaria and high death rates.

One particularly vulnerable group is the army of migrant women who work as domestic servants for families in rich countries, the study noted.

"Domestic workers are rarely protected by labour laws or allowed to organise. This leaves many dependent on employers for legal status, basic needs such as housing and food and the payment of due wages," it said.

"It also leaves them vulnerable to abuse. The report calls on governments to protect the rights of domestic workers."

The UNFPA's focus on women migrants in this year's population report is designed to urge world leaders to address their needs

during a special UN session on migration later this month.

"(This meeting) represents a critical opportunity to ensure that the needs and human rights of migrant women and their contribution to poverty reduction and development are explicitly and adequately recognised and addressed," the UNFPA said.

Ninety five million women have now left their home countries -- some in search of a better life, others forced to flee by conflict and persecution -- the report said.

These women send hundreds of millions of dollars back to their families and communities every year, helping the latter feed and educate their children, improve health care, build homes and support small businesses.

In the receiving countries migrant women are such an integral part of society, particularly as nurses, child carers, domestic workers and cleaners, that their contribution goes virtually unnoticed, the report said.



A baby, holding a paper made fan with the Japanese characters for "celebration", is carried by a young mother to celebrate the birth of Japan's new prince in front of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo yesterday.

Baluchistan on strike over Bugti's killing

AFP, Quetta

Parts of the troubled southwest Pakistani province of Baluchistan were paralysed yesterday by a strike called by opposition parties to protest the killing of a rebel tribal chief.

Schools and shopping centres were closed and public transport ground to a halt in the provincial capital Quetta and several other towns, but there were no immediate reports of violence.

"There is complete strike in Baluchistan to protest the killing of

Nawab Akbar Bugti in a military operation," secretary general of the Baluchistan National Party, Habib Jabib Baloch told AFP.

"We will continue our protest until people of Baluchistan get their due rights," Baloch said.

Bugti, who died in a cave hideout during an army operation, was buried in haste on Friday as a strike crippled Baluchistan.

His death sparked nationwide protests and deadly violence in Baluchistan where 10 people have died in bomb blasts, attacks and

clashes with police in the past week.

Officials said security had been stepped up in the province to prevent violence.

"It's opposition's right to protest, but a strike every other day does not serve their cause as the public faces numerous troubles," provincial government spokesman Raziq Bugti told AFP.

Bugti led an armed campaign to press for provincial autonomy and a greater share of profits from Baluchistan's natural resources.

TERROR CHARGES

Two Muslims remanded in Denmark

AFP, Copenhagen

Two of the nine men arrested by Danish police on suspicion of planning acts of terrorism were remanded in custody for four weeks, a Danish court said yesterday.

Judge Ingrid Therkelsen ruled that five others arrested on Tuesday were to be detained for 72 hours, judging that police lacked sufficient evidence to hold the men longer.

Two others who were arrested at the same time were released.

The two facing a month's detention were charged with planning terrorist acts in the months "leading up to September 5 2006".

The seven were aged 18 to 33 and arrested during a police raid overnight on Tuesday in the heavily immigrant-populated neighbourhood of Vollsmose in the town of Odense, central Denmark, after a lengthy period of surveillance.

The closed hearing of the seven suspects lasted around 12 hours and ended at 0100 GMT on Wednesday.

The identities of the detainees were not revealed, but all seven were Danish citizens, six of Palestinian or Iraqi origin. The seventh, an ethnic Dane, had converted to Islam. All were devout Muslims.

DRUG SMUGGLING

5 more Australians to die in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Five Australians have been sentenced to death for drug smuggling in Indonesia after a supreme court judge handed down tougher sentences in response to their appeals, a court spokesman said yesterday.

A court official said the ruling meant that a total of seven Australians, part of the so-called Bali Nine, would face the firing squad for trafficking heroin from the Indonesian resort island last year.

"Yes, it's true -- seven people have been given the death sen-

tence," Supreme Court spokesman Joko Upoyo Pribadi told AFP.

The supreme court upheld the death penalty for two defendants -- Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, he said.

The court handed down stiffer sentences to five others -- Tach Duc Thanh Nguyen, James Norman, Si Yi Chen, Scott Rush and Renae Lawrence -- in response to their appeals, the spokesman said.

British cops free 2 of 14 terror suspects

AFP, London

British police released without charge two of the 14 people arrested over the weekend in the latest anti-terror raid in Britain, a police spokeswoman said yesterday.

The two men, identified by police only as suspects F and I, were released without charge late Tuesday night, the spokeswoman said.

Of the remaining 12, three can be detained until Wednesday, while nine can be held by police until Friday.

Under British anti-terror laws, police can detain terrorism suspects for up to 28 days without charging them with an offence, subject to regular court approval.

The 14 were arrested in police

raids in London overnight Saturday on suspicion of planning acts of terrorism, prompting searches, including one at an Islamic school.

"In all operations, some people may be released early without charge while others may remain in custody for further investigation," the spokeswoman said.

"This is not unusual and is to be expected in large and complex criminal enquiries where a number of arrests have taken place."

The spokeswoman also said that police were carrying out a number of searches at residential premises in south, east and north London, but declined to specify where in the capital, or how many searches were being carried out.

One additional search was also ongoing at a premises in East Sussex, southeast England.

No state funeral for Irwin, says grieving father

AFP, Beerwah

Wildlife TV star Steve Irwin's grieving father Wednesday turned down a state funeral for a son he described as "just an ordinary bloke", as a global wave of mourning astonished Australia.

Fighting back tears, the weather-beaten, khaki-clad Bob

Irwin told an impromptu news conference that his son had been his "best mate" and funeral arrangements would be up to his American widow Terri and their two young children.

Irwin was speaking to reporters outside his son's Australia Zoo in this small northeastern town, where a massive shrine of flowers, notes

and personal mementoes has been laid by thousands of fans of television's wildlife warrior.

The premier of Queensland state, Peter Beattie, had offered to provide a state funeral but Irwin said the star of the Discovery Channel hit series "Crocodile Hunter" would not have wanted a grand send-off.

"The state funeral would be refused because he's just an ordinary guy, and he wants to be remembered as an ordinary bloke," Irwin said.

Steve Irwin, 44, was killed Monday off the Great Barrier Reef when the tail barb of a giant stingray punctured his heart as the creature lashed out at him while he was filming.

"He certainly did die doing something he loved doing, and that's a lot better than being hit by a bus," said his father. "He wouldn't have wanted it any other way."

The tape showing Irwin's death should never be shown, his close friend and "Crocodile Hunter" producer John Stainton said.

"It should be destroyed," he said on CNN's Larry King Live. "At the moment, it's in police custody for evidence ... and when that (tape) is finally released it will never see the light of day, ever."



AFP file photo of Steve Irwin posing with a three-foot-long alligator.