

Unicef report: 250,000 children die each week

by Kathleen Klenetsky

A new report issued by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) paints an alarming picture of the conditions in which the majority of the world's children live. Fully a quarter of a million children die needlessly each week, and millions more are surviving in the "half-life of malnutrition and almost permanent ill-health" due to the lack of adequate food, medicine, and other necessities of life.

The report calls for implementing a "new order" for the world's children. "This is not a threatened tragedy or an impending crisis," says Unicef Executive Director James Grant. "It happened today. And it will happen again tomorrow. It is a problem which should rank in importance with any on the human agenda. But in practice, it has been given a low priority because it is primarily a problem of the poor and the powerless."

Entitled "The State of the World's Children 1992," the Unicef study documents that warfare alone has taken the lives of 1.5 million children, disabled another 4 million, and made 12 million more homeless. The report specifically cites the case of Iraq, whose infrastructure was destroyed by U.S. bombs in the Gulf war, and which still suffers under an international embargo. Young children there, it states, "are at this moment paying the heaviest price for the Gulf war," as "child mortality rates have increased steeply over the last year."

Killer debt

Debt is another leading child-killer. Countries struggling to meet their payments to the International Monetary Fund and the big banks have been forced to cut back drastically on their spending for food subsidies, health care, and other programs that had previously kept the poorer sections of society alive.

"We do know that it is children who have paid the heaviest price for the developing world's debts," the report states. "Fragmentary evidence, pieced together by Unicef over the last decade, has shown a picture of rising child deaths, in some of the most heavily indebted countries of Africa and Latin America."

Although the report focuses primarily on the plight of children in the Third World, it also indicts the United States for tolerating a startling increase in poverty among its own younger generation.

"In the 1960s, the proportion of U.S. children living in poverty was halved from 27% to 14%," says the report. "In

the 1970s, it crept back to 17%. Then, in the 1980s, it rose again to 22%," according to the report. Puncturing the myth that most of America's poor children are born out of wedlock to black women on welfare, the report reveals that a majority of America's 12 million poor children are white, live outside big cities, and in families which have only one or two children, and in which at least one parent works.

The study cites two main reasons for rising poverty in the United States: First, "the erosion of benefits provided by government to poor families with children and, second, the steady fall in real wages among America's unskilled. The average weekly wage of non-supervisory workers fell by approximately 20% between 1973 and 1990," it reports, while the real value of payments under the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program "has dropped by approximately 40% over 20 years."

Free market also to blame

While citing progress in several areas, including the immunization of more children in the developing sector, and claiming that the issue of child welfare is now being accorded greater attention than in the past, the Unicef study does not hold out much hope for the future, especially given the rapid collapse of the world economy.

The report highlights a recent study Unicef conducted on the economic collapse of eastern Europe. Although the report doesn't indict the U.S.-promoted free market lunacy which has caused this collapse, it does document the consequences: "Unemployment in Hungary increased tenfold between late 1989 and May 1991. In Poland, the end-of-1991 unemployment figure is expected to be 2 million—almost 15% of the labor force. . . . For those at work, incomes have fallen steeply. Average real incomes in Poland fell by 25% in the first nine months of 1990. In Bulgaria, the fall has been nearer 50%. . . . In Poland and the U.S.S.R., 40% now live below the official poverty line."

Deep government cuts in food and other subsidies in these countries have created a situation in which many families are now spending 50-60% of income on food alone. In Albania, "approximately 20% of all children are now malnourished, and infant mortality is more than double its 1989 level."

Although the Unicef report performs a useful service by presenting these grim facts, its policy recommendations range from inadequate to dangerous; The only positive exception is its proposal that "the chain's of Africa's debt be struck off."

Otherwise, the report calls for population control ("one of the most effective and least expensive ways of improving the quality of life on Earth"), and for a "process of demilitarization [beginning] in the developing world." The latter is part of the effort by the Anglo-American empire to destroy the militaries in Ibero-America and other areas where the military often functions as the only institutional defender of national sovereignty.