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Commentary

Overpopulation real concern

by Leon Kolankiewicz

The world's poor nations are not guilty of looting the Earth's resources and unleashing unprecedented threats to its environment on nearly the scale that rich nations have. But their burgeoning populations now pose a serious threat to their own resources and survival.

Honduras, a U.S. neighbor in Central America, is a case in point. What matters is not so much its current population of 4.7 million, but its growth rate. It is doubling every 20 years.

To argue that the country is not overpopulated is to miss the point; doubling every 20 years, it soon will be.

Honduras is a lush, tropical country, but very mountainous. Only one-fifth of its land is arable. The rest is steep hillsides with thin soils poorly suited to cultivation.

Yet that is precisely what they are subjected to. Rapidly increasing numbers of impoverished peasants are forced to scrape these slopes bare in their desperate struggle to survive. Streams are clogged with silt that used to be life-giving soil.

Inequitable land distribution exacerbates the problem. A rich minority grazes cattle on the only land suitable for crops.

Forests once covered the entire country; only one-third

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remain. Blistering droughts now lay siege to the most deforested regions.

Yet the country does not look crowded to the untrained eye, and many people do not think the national average of seven children per mother is excessive.

The Catholic Church, in fact, argues that Honduras is underpopulated. It lobbies vehemently against any programs that smack of "family planning" or "population control."

The nation's archbishop recently called the Honduran Family Planning Association "murderers" and "agents of the demon." Abortions are illegal, so it is for distributing contraceptives and knowledge that the organization earned this condemnation.

Last year opposition by the Church and its allies scuttled a proposed United Nations-funded population education program. It was denounced as "genocide" and "a knife-stab against Honduras." A Catholic spokesman claimed the coun-

try's resources could support double or triple the present population.

It is doubtful he understood how quickly it will double and triple. It has taken centuries to reach 4.7 million, but at present rates it will reach nine million in just 20 years and 18 million in 20 years more. That is the nature of exponential growth.

Technical analyses indicate many resources are already severely stressed. What will happen with two, four, or eight times as many people?

Honduras is on a collision course with disaster. But it is not unique. Most of the world's poorer countries share its dilemma.

More and more, these nations realize that excessive population growth is crushing their aspirations. But poverty, political opportunism and the religious right are formidable obstacles.

In the U.S., for example, the Reagan administration slashed funding for the International Planned Parenthood Federation at the behest of fundamentalists. Meanwhile, an estimated 400 million women worldwide don't want any more children but cannot obtain family-planning services.

It is no exaggeration that unless this changes, these people are doomed.