

# REPORT ON THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL

Katherine Carré, June 20, 2007

*The UN Human Rights Council held its fifth session in Geneva from 11<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> June 2007 and has successfully survived its year of transformation and institution building, but not without pains. Only a few thematic reports were presented, amongst which the Right to Food. The UN Special Rapporteur on Food will be one of the speakers at the Forum in Geneva later this month which two SD people will attend. This report is in two parts.*

## PART I CHILDREN AND HUNGER

Jean Ziegler, the UN Special Rapporteur on Food, presented his report<sup>1</sup>[1] to the Human Rights Council:

On the world food situation there has been no improvement. The number of people suffering from hunger has increased to 854 million people and has been increasing every year since 1996.

It is a cold matter-of-fact statement and it is necessary to pause for a second to realize that it is about millions of avoidable tragedies since we live in a world of plenty. In WE FEED THE WORLD<sup>2</sup>[2], a documentary film on food production and globalization which is showing just now all over Europe, the Special Rapporteur speaks with great feeling of the angst of the hungry when thinking of tomorrow and the tricks mothers have to invent to put their children to sleep on an empty stomach.

As regards the plight of children, on World Food Day last year, the Executive Director of the World Food Programme stated “Every day some 18 000 children die of hunger and malnutrition. Yet there are no public headlines and no public outcry. Yet these poor children die in silence, far from our sight in many countries of the world. This need not happen: we have every tool we need to solve hunger.”

In his presentation Jean Ziegler repeated his famous phrase, that in a world which produces twice the amount of food required to feed everyone on earth, every child who dies of hunger is an murder.

Malnutrition is the cause of half of all deaths of children under 5 years of age. Those who survive may never reach their full adult potential, and will probably suffer from stunted growth and limited intellectual development.

*Some of us have no doubt wondered what would be the future of some of the little children in the Mithra Foundation pre-school, those who sat there motionless with a vacant look and others who rocked nervously and incessantly from side to side. Born underweight to underweight underfed mothers and underfed, the chain must be broken.*

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<sup>1</sup>[1] UN document A/HRC/4/30 of 19.1.07

<sup>2</sup>[2] « We Feed the World » by the Austrian film maker Erwin Wagenhofer

The extreme vulnerability of children to hunger is well known. The lack of vitamin A, essential for immune system functions, their survival and development; iodine deficiency which prevents normal growth in the brain and nervous system; iron-deficiency anaemia also affects intellectual development in young children. And unsafe drinking water weakens the system.

*In Ecuador, the Association Vivir is known all over South America for its work with communities on healthy ways of living and nutrition whilst on the other side of the world, in the villages of Tamil Nadu, SRADHA is sowing the seeds for better nutrition.*

The report continues, “All human beings have the right to live in dignity free from hunger.” They do indeed as has been recognized by all States in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In addition, for children, the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that States shall “ensure to the maximum extent the survival and development of the child”, adequate nutrition and clean water being the very basics.

Many States have in fact been taking steps to protect children, for example by adopting the International Marketing Code of Breastfeeding Substitutes which protects against marketing strategies to convince women that substitutes are better than breast milk. But the code is reportedly not always respected by the food multinationals.

Providing cooked meals to children in school is proving to be a very effective way of ensuring adequate nutrition in countries such as India, South Africa, Cuba and Brazil where programmes have been introduced on a large scale. The Special Rapporteur strongly recommends that school meal programmes be universalized and special programmes be initiated for the 140 million children under 12 who still have no access to school.

### **The special case of children in armed groups**

A special section of the report reviews how the role hunger and the lack of food security have created an environment driving some 250 000 children into armed groups. Children, boys as well as the more vulnerable girls, are recruited into armies and militias for various purposes, as combatants, spies, for sex, as porters and servants in several African and Asian countries as well as in Columbia. Whilst recruitment of children by force is practiced, coming from the poorest section of the population most children are known to volunteer in order to obtain food and income for themselves and their families. This does not, however, mean that hunger and starvation do not catch up with them later on whilst serving in the armies.

*The Fundacion El Refugio in Colombia is a much-needed shelter for youths who might otherwise fall prey to drugs and criminal activity. By providing psycho-social support and silversmith skills, the Fundacion has the capacity to reintegrate into society street children as well as former combatants.*

In reaction to the use of children in war, which is one of the great tragedies of our times, all the players of the international community have made impressive concerted efforts to raise awareness of the problem and to focus on the elimination of recruitment of children into armed forces, and some progress has been achieved.

However the Special Rapporteur is concerned that efforts are not sufficiently focusing on the root cause of children in armies. It is urgent to recognize the link between hunger and child recruitment into armed groups.

## **PART II FLEEING FROM HUNGER**

About 10 000 men, women and children are believed to have been engulfed by the Mediterranean Sea these last few years whilst fleeing in the most dramatic conditions from hopelessness and hunger in Africa to the shores of Europe. It is estimated that about 2 million people – mainly from sub-Saharan Africa and Morocco - try to enter the European Union illegally every year. About 60 000 made it to the coasts of Spain and Italy in 2005, but statistics are not readily available. The main routes these days are via the Canary Islands and Gibraltar (since the Spanish African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla were surrounded by electrified walls after the tragic events of 2 years ago), the Italian island of Lampedusa and Malta.

Like the children dying of hunger, the death of would-be immigrants by drowning, exhaustion or dehydration does not catch the headlines; but when a body rolls up on a beach in the midst of sunbathers, as happens now and again, there is a paragraph in the local newspaper. Recently, however, large scale arrivals from Africa have become a matter of concern and the issue is rapidly becoming international news as Spain, Italy and callous Malta turn to the EU for refugees to be shared with other countries. So far EU action has been to set up a new agency, Frontex, providing rapid reaction teams of border guards; for its first operation it used patrol boats, helicopters and airplanes operating along parts of the African coast to intercept boats and return them immediately to shore.

The Special Rapporteur states that it is famine, destitution and chronic hunger in many regions of the world, particularly in Africa, that force people to leave their homes for perilous journeys - hunger and famine not due only to drought but to economic and political problems as well. When people flee to developed countries and are lucky enough to get there alive, they are treated as “illegal migrants”, arrested and placed in detention camps and usually deported. The situation is particularly dramatic for people fleeing from sub-Saharan Africa.

Taking a closer look, BBC correspondents have been told by Africans attempting the northward journey that they are fully aware of the dangers, that for every person who reaches the promised shore there is another one who dies or is sent back. Many make several attempts rather than admit failure at home. There are terrifying tales of people crossing the desert, robbed on the way or young women abducted and forced into prostitution, before they even reach the profiteering smugglers who pack them into leaky boats.....

The Special Rapporteur proposes that migrants from hunger be given special refugee status at least on a temporary basis and that they be distinguished from “economic migrants” voluntarily seeking better opportunities by migrating to countries which have no obligation to take them in. Refugee status under the 1951 Convention is only recognized for well-founded fear of persecution leading to involuntary emigration. Since fleeing from hunger is also involuntary, a similar status could be granted to such migrants. As has been pointed

out, there is not much difference between dying from one's convictions and dying from hunger..... .. but Jean Ziegler's proposal is unlikely to be very popular.....

### **El Dorado**

Some of those who flee from Africa do manage to stay and find underpaid work in the new El Dorados, which are not what they expected. There is an interesting example in Spain – with no connection with Spain's generous development policy in Africa. The Andalusian town and area of El Ejido, not far from the Costa del Sol, produces and exports to the whole of Europe its attractive looking tasteless fruit and vegetables grown in greenhouses which form the world's largest concentration of whitish plastic tents stretching over 17 000 hectares. The labour intensive work is provided by immigrants.

El Ejido, once a poor area from which the Spaniards were moving away has developed into an economic miracle and the third richest town in Spain with the highest concentration of bank agencies. A miracle thanks to the tens of thousands of migrants who work in the greenhouses and pick tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers and aubergines all day in temperatures of over 40 ° for 2.00 to 2.50 Euros an hour. Most of them come from Morocco, others from sub-Saharan Africa and from Rumania and elsewhere.

A Moroccan journalist, Jawad Rhalib, who had witnessed the violent racist events of 2000 in El Ejido, returned in 2006 and made a prize-winning documentary, "El Ejido, the Law of Profit"<sup>3[3]</sup> showing with subtlety and objectivity the conditions in which immigrants live hidden from the world, in shacks used long ago by the farming population or in cardboard and plastic structures, mostly without electricity, sanitation or garbage removal. The workers are not even provided with clean drinking water.

Rhalib interviews a cross-section of population, from illiterate nomads to educated but impoverished Moroccans who had shared the same desperate need to leave their country to feed their families. With ample supplies of fresh immigrants ready to replace them, demanding better conditions is not a choice: the choice is between exploited employment and no employment, and the choice is clear.

Asked why he made this film, Rhalib gave two reasons. One is for the Africans, to show them what they can expect by emigrating (but he says they don't believe him), another is to attract the attention of European consumers to the conditions in which their fruit and vegetables are produced. A third reason is more a hope that civil society will take up the cause of migrants.

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<sup>3[3]</sup> The film was shown at this year's International Film Festival on Human Rights in Geneva. The main patron of the Festival had been the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the late Sergio Veira de Mello, killed in Bagdad in 2003, together with Ken Loach, Robert Badinter, Jorje Semprum and Barbara Hendricks, and since the summer of 2004, Louise Arbour, the present High Commissioner for Human Rights. They were joined by Ruth Dreifuss, former President of Switzerland, Amos Gitai and William Hurt. The inspiration and impetus of the Festival came from a number of NGOs, especially the World Organization against Torture, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and International Federation on Human Rights

