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Population Milestone A Consumption Millstone

By Zack Gross

The US Census Bureau recently set a ceremonial time of 7:46 a.m. on Tuesday, October 17th to mark that country's population reaching 300 million. Only China and India have more people. Congratulations are being handed out all round. After all, forty years ago, predictions were made by Paul Ehrlich, in his book, *The Population Bomb*, and by the Club of Rome in their report, *The Limits to Growth*, that population growth around the world would spell catastrophe – famine, environmental collapse and war on a massive scale. Seemingly, it hasn't happened.

The British magazine, *The Economist*, recently described the continued population growth in the US, in the face of decline in Europe, as a sign of faith and optimism. To replace a country's population, families on average must have just over two children each (a little extra to replace occasional young deaths). European countries, such as Italy and Spain were at 1.3 children per family in 2005, which means that they are facing population shrinkage. Facing greater overall losses are crowded Asian countries such as Japan and city states such as Hong Kong and Macau with rates of less than one per family.

The US rate is an overall population growth of 1%, meaning that by 2043, their numbers will pass 400 million. One American is born every seven seconds, while another dies every thirteen. Add to this net migration of one person every 31 seconds (and that's only the legal ones)! The US population is changing dramatically as well, as new immigrants and largest families are usually Hispanic. The population is relocating as well. In the past forty years, people have chosen to leave the Northeast and Midwest for warmer climates in the South and West. The US is also becoming younger, on average, while others countries face an aging populace.

Other populous countries face difficult problems in the future. China will have 20% of the world's population in 2025, says the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, but also 25% of the people over 65. Although the Chinese population is generally poor, they have few children in order to comply with government regulations. This goes against the usual trend that poorer people have larger families so they have children to do the physical labour needed to make a living and take care of their parents in their old age. When today's Chinese senior is aged, they will have to keep working to survive as they will have little family to back them up.

Russia's situation seems even more urgent. As with most of the former Soviet Union, Third World conditions abound. Today, seven hundred thousand more Russians die than are born annually. The breakdown of Soviet society has led to poverty, poor diet and violence, along with mass addiction levels of smoking and drinking. This has brought life expectancy levels down to where the average Russian male has only a 50-50 chance

of reaching the age of 65, now considered middle age in North America. Development workers with experience in Africa, the world's poorest continent, describe parts of Eastern Europe as "abject Third World poverty plus winter".

A survey of the electronic and published media's coverage of the US population reaching 300 million yields a massive number of positive articles. Many of them crow patriotically about how such a large country can be so wealthy and how, if you thought the US had problems, take a look at those other countries. But, a brave few, such as CNN, take a more critical view of the situation, citing demographic and environmental problems that already exist and are going to get worse.

A CNN on-line article quotes the organization Population Connection, which asks questions about the overcrowding of major cities, the growing burden on programs and services, and the safety of citizens. The US now has the highest teen pregnancy rate of all industrialized countries and there is a huge problem with childhood and elderly asthma from pollution.

Land development is taking place at twice the rate of population growth and the areas of greatest growth are in dry, Western areas, affecting water resources. As well, the US consumes a quarter of the world's energy and is the largest emitter of carbon dioxide in the world. Crime, gangs and violence abound in many cities, racial tensions are often high, and many poor neighbourhoods see no way out of their misery.

It is a rule of thumb that the developed world consumes the lion's share of world resources. An educated guess is that each of us in Canada and the US consumes at least sixty times what a person in Africa or Latin America does, on average, in our lifetimes. Sixty times more food, clothing, petroleum, construction materials, and more. As our population grows, we consume more, adversely affecting the environment, but also influencing the world's political order, global economic negotiations, social policies and even causing war.

The recent Stern Report, by one of Britain's former chief economists, outlined the dire consequences now unfolding with global warming, caused chiefly by the wealthiest and most populous nations on the planet. He pointed out that the poorest people would suffer the most, but that those of us considered wealthy would be plunged into economic depression. Maybe Paul Ehrlich, a generation ago in the Population Bomb, wasn't so wrong, after all!

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