

BACKGROUND AND ISSUES FOR A POWERFUL NOISE

Vietnam and HIV/AIDS

In Vietnam, HIV/AIDS is increasing at an alarming rate on par with, if not worse than, many of those countries of Africa most devastated by the epidemic. The U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) has created a list of 15 "Focus Countries." Vietnam is the only Asian country -- and one of only three non-African countries -- on the list. In 2006, 260,000 people in Vietnam were living with HIV and 13,000 died of AIDS. While reported cases reflect a relatively smaller, more concentrated epidemic, trends indicate that HIV infection is spreading to the general population. At the current rate, Vietnam is expected to have 1 million cases by 2010, a four-fold increase.

Common assumptions are that the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Vietnam is concentrated on drug users, due to the sharing of needles, and on sex workers. Both groups are perceived as "social evils" in that culture. This connection between HIV/AIDS and "social evils" was institutionalized when, in 2000, the Vietnamese government formed the National Committee for AIDS, Drugs and Prostitution, which included members of the Department for Social Evil Prevention. Although the committee was restructured in 2003, its brief existence reinforced the public notion that the disease was a symptom of social evil. Accordingly, speaking about sexual matters and HIV is taboo, creating a setting where education about HIV/AIDS, even if available, is culturally unacceptable. Such lack of education fosters its spread.

Incomplete knowledge often leads to an unfounded fear of infection through casual contact. The associated stigma and discrimination prevents individuals from getting tested and treated. This calls into question the original low estimates of people living with HIV/AIDS. As a result of the stigma, people with HIV are often isolated from their homes and communities. The majority of Vietnamese society believes that those with the disease deserve it, even if it was contracted unknowingly from a partner or parent involved in "social evils."

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Mali, Migration and Child Labor

Labor migration has been a historical fact of life throughout West Africa. While trade routes have long been a part of the regional economy, patterns of labor migration were established during the colonial period, which is still evident today. Mali is the third poorest nation in the world, according to the Human Development Index. As a result, it is common for people to migrate from Mali to other countries, such as Côte d'Ivoire, or from rural Mali to urban centers, such as the capital of Bamako.

Education in Mali is supposedly compulsory and free up to age 12. Still, classrooms are overcrowded, and many times led by untrained teachers who use sub-standard curriculums. In addition, students are left with the responsibility to purchase uniforms and supplies. When taking into account rates of enrollment, attendance and completion, the education system of Mali is ranked exceptionally low, especially among girls. For most Malian parents, it is more economically beneficial to the family if their children work, rather than attend school. In 2002, nearly half of children ages 10 to 14 were part of the Mali work force. They often migrate to find work. Usually, the migration begins as a voluntary act to earn income for the family and/or to accumulate a dowry; often these children end up in an involuntary life of exploitation and servitude.

Many children who make their way to the capital city of Bamako end up becoming one of the city's "street kids." The average age of these children is 15, and they have no form of adult supervision. While the literacy rate in Mali is altogether very low, the female literacy rate is much lower than that of males. So girls are less able to handle life on the city streets and are more susceptible to being forced into domestic servitude. In Africa, 85 percent of child domestic workers are girls. Domestic servants are discriminated against, often contracted unwillingly to employers, and are worked long hours for little to no pay. Lack of governmental oversight subjects domestic servants and girls working on the street to unchecked sexual harassment and abuse. There are a number of laws to curb the exploitation of child labor and the trafficking of children, but enforcement is virtually non-existent. Unless, there are significant measures to enforce those laws, the same heartbreaking story will play over and over for domestic servants and other "street kids."

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Ethnic conflict in Bosnia

To understand the civil war of Bosnia-Herzegovina, it is imperative to know about the three dominant ethnicities making up the country's population, as well as the breakup of Yugoslavia that preceded the conflict. The country consists primarily of three ethnicities: Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks. The main tensions of Bosnia-Herzegovina lie between the Serbs and Bosniaks. These tensions are complicated and deeply rooted in complex historical experiences – which span religious convictions, political ambitions, economic factors and many other influences. Bosnia-Herzegovina lost its independence in the 15th century when it was conquered by the Ottoman Empire. While under Ottoman control, Bosniaks converted to Islam while most Serbs held onto their Orthodox Christianity. Over the centuries, control of Bosnia-Herzegovina exchanged hands between a number of empires and countries until it finally regained its independence in 1992. The last entity to govern Bosnia-Herzegovina was the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ruled by the iron fist of Josip Broz Tito. His reign lasted from 1945 until his death in 1980.

Starting in the 1980s, the communist bloc of Europe began its slow crumble into history. In its place came a rising economic crisis and a resurgence of local nationalism. By 1992, Yugoslavia disintegrated despite efforts to keep the federation together. While most of the partition of Yugoslavia was relatively peaceful, civil war erupted in Bosnia-Herzegovina (later Serbia embarked on a military campaign to regain Kosovo). Bosnian Serbs, with the backing of Serbia, began attacking the Bosniak-led government in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Eventually, Croats were embroiled in the conflict and “ethnic cleansing” ensued between all factions. NATO intervention and the Dayton Peace Process ended the war in 1995. Approximately 100,000 people had died, and most scholars agree that Bosniaks suffered the worst acts of genocide. The massacre at Srebrenica alone resulted in the death of up to 8,000 Bosniak citizens.

Since the end of the Cold War, the number of internal armed civil conflicts has increased dramatically, with more non-combatant deaths than combatants. As a result, neighbors have literally killed neighbors, breeding distrust and hatred, often between ethnicities. Such battles wreck economies. Without some level of reconciliation, especially after war, markets do not open and sufficient trade comes to a halt. Today, nearly half of Bosnia-Herzegovina is unemployed, and the GDP of the country is still far below their 1990 level. Incomes of citizens have fallen dramatically and their infrastructure is still in shambles.

Many of the most effective post-war organizations are women's groups. Typically it is women within these divided societies who are the first to bridge the divide to solve problems. By finding solidarity as women – as seen in Bosnia-Herzegovina – they put ethnic allegiance aside, and strive toward what's most important to humanity as a whole: peace and progress.

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