



Asian Forum

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Newsletter

A PUBLICATION OF THE ASIAN FORUM OF PARLIAMENTARIANS ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

THE ASIA-PACIFIC PARLIAMENTARIANS' FORUM ON INEQUALITY AND HUNGER

Parliamentarians Forum Calls for Stronger and Better Strategies to Reduce Inequality and Hunger

Colombo—Organized by AFPPD and UNDP Regional Centres, in cooperation with the Millennium Campaign, the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians' Forum on Hunger and Inequality took place in Colombo, Sri Lanka, from 16-17 February. 34 parliamentarians from 12 countries in the region gathered here to seize upon a unique opportunity to exchange lessons and experience; enhance connection between parliamentarians and electorates; and formulate and implement national and regional strategies for action.

Also in attendance were members of the diplomatic community, including the UK Ambassador, and high-level officials of the Sri Lankan government, including Mr. Nimal Siripala de Silva, Minister of Healthcare and Nutrition, who addressed the Forum.

The conference recognized the progress made on many of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in the region but noted that progress towards reducing hunger has been relatively slow compared

to other MDG targets. The region has the greatest number of undernourished people in the world (61%). Nearly half of all South Asian children are malnourished, compared to one-third of children in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Hunger and agricultural production have drawn government attention in light of the recent food price crisis, but to ensure food security and reduce hunger requires addressing the underlying causes of hunger in the region, which are deep rooted, including widening disparities and inequitable resource distribution.

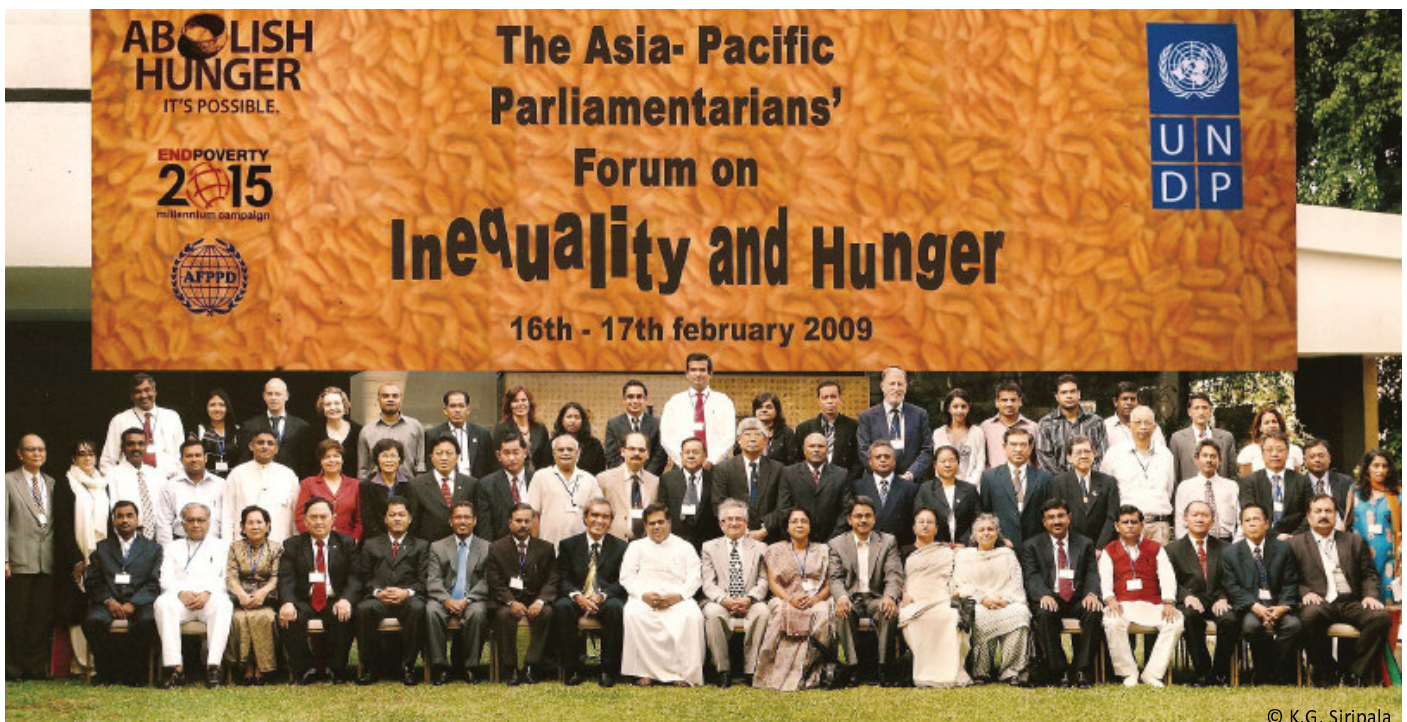
Over the course of the Forum, participants heard from a distinguished group of international experts on hunger and inequality, drawn from UN agencies, academia, Government, NGOs and from the ranks of parliamentarians themselves. Participants used these presentations as a platform for discussions on subjects including climate change; food safety nets; gender, inequality and hunger; hunger as a legally enforceable human right; and

agricultural productivity.

Keynote addresses were delivered by Professor Mohan Munasinghe, Chair of Munasinghe Institute of Development, and vice-chair of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; Ms. Caitlin Wiesen, UNDP Regional Centre in Colombo (RCC); Dr. Yasmeen Khwaja, Consultant Economist; and Mr. Omar Noman, Chief of Policies and Programmes at the UNDP RCC.

Mr. Omar Noman opened the Forum by welcoming speakers and participants to Colombo. He then gave an overview of hunger and inequality in Asia. Social and economic inequalities persisted in Asia despite the spread of democracy and rapid economic growth in recent years. For example, 4 of the top 10 richest people in the world are from India, where over 300 million people lived in absolute poverty. In regards to hunger, the situation is most critical in the Indian subcontinent (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan), Cambodia, Laos and the

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Democratic People's Republic of Korea although national data conceal important local disparities.

Professor Munasinghe discussed meeting the multiple challenges of the hunger-poverty-climate change nexus. He addressed the intricate interconnectedness of the three global issues and emphasized that none can be tackled in isolation. An effective response to these challenges requires a comprehensive approach with targeted actions in each country.

Mr. Minar Pimple, Deputy Director of the UN Millennium Campaign Asia in Bangkok, outlined the work of the UN Millennium Campaign in achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. He urged parliamentarians to show political leadership at local and national level and highlighted their role to remind their governments of the pledges they signed up to in regards to the MDGs.

Dr. Pinit Kullavanijaya, Senator from Thailand and Secretary General of AFPPD, expressed his appreciation at AFPPD collaborating with UNDP and UN Millennium Campaign in advancing the MDG agenda. It was widely acknowledged that food scarcity does not keep people hungry as food is adequately available; instead, it is poverty that cripples people's ability to buy food. The Forum would discuss ways of eliminating hunger including generating sustainable economic growth, engaging in fair trade practices, managing the equitable distribution of food, increasing food production and reducing population growth. Dr. Pinit hoped the Forum would result in a renewed commitment to tackling hunger and inequality in Asia.

On Day 2, experts and parliamentarians discussed a range of issues and strategies pertinent to reducing poverty and inequality, including empowerment of women as the key to reducing hunger;

Forum Participant Raises Awareness on Poverty & Hunger in Malaysian Parliament

Dr. Tan Seng Giaw, MP of Malaysia, upon his return from the AFPPD-UNDP regional Parliamentarians' Forum on Inequality and Hunger in Colombo, spoke up in the Lower House of the Malaysian Parliament on various issues including discrimination of women, poverty and hunger, while also highlighting recommendations emanating from the Hunger Forum.

Pointing to the large number of people worldwide living below the poverty line and in poor health, especially children and youths, Dr. Tan highlighted Malaysia's overall achievement in poverty reduction,

STATEMENT OF COMMITMENT

*Arising from the
Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians' Forum on Inequality and Hunger*

WE, the representatives of the people of our country, together this day, February 17, 2009, Colombo, Sri Lanka, have resolved to fight to comprehensively address inequality and hunger. We hereby pledge to undertake take the following steps to eliminate the scourges from our countries:

We recognize that food is a human right, and we shall support and implement legislation to enforce that right.

We are convinced that women's empowerment is crucial in eliminating hunger and we shall institute gender friendly policies to ensure that women receive a fair share of food within the household.

We agree to ensure that every child has enough to eat by putting in place and strengthening interventions such as school and infant feeding programmes.

We shall invest in agricultural infrastructure to increase productivity, in order to achieve food security and meet farmers' livelihood needs.

We undertake to support programmes which guarantee employment to the poor.

We pledge to support the poor through food safety nets.

We, hereby, reaffirm our commitment and undertake all that is in our wherewithal, to translate this vision into ground action to make our communities hunger free.

the forthcoming Asia Pacific Human Development report; food security through public distribution system (PDS) in India; pre-school and school feeding; and conditional cash transfers, education and health programmes.

The current global financial and economic crisis is presenting a major challenge to poverty and hunger reduction, but experts also called on governments to use this as an opportunity to integrate pro-poor policy into their economic recovery plans.

Resource persons at the Forum also included: Mr. John Coonrad, Vice

President, The Hunger Project; Dr. Ramesh Gampat, UNDP RCC; Dr. N.C. Saxena, Former Secretary, Planning Commission, Commissioner, Food Security, Supreme Court of India; Ms. Anuradha K. Rajivan, UNDP RCC; Ms. Evelyne Rodriguez, Consultant of Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS); Mr. T. Palanivel, Senior Advisor, UNDP RCC; and Mr. Prashan Thalayasingam, Center for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka.

As this was an action-orientated Forum, participants signed a pledge, which committed them to take action against hunger and inequality (see above). ■

but he also cautioned that a closer look at data reveals high poverty rates among underprivileged and marginalized communities, such as the aborigines in Peninsular Malaysia, among whom poverty rate is at 76.9%. The figure remains high also in Sabah and Sarawak, he said.

Malaysia has implemented the supplementary food programme since 1983. In 2008, the Government allocated RM249.8 million for the programme including the RM26.6 million for school milk programme, but there are gaps and leakages. He noted that poverty and

hunger are compounded by factors such as prevalence of HIV/AIDS, discrimination against women, poor health, bad distribution system, and inadequate infrastructure.

Dr. Tan recommended that policymakers consult legal experts on needed legislations concerning poverty, hunger and women's empowerment, as well as to monitor the Health and Women's Ministries' implementation on these matters. He further stressed the need for constant follow-up on implementation of these policies. ■

Expert Group Calls for Integration of Population and Gender Concerns Into Development Agenda

The Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on the implementation of the Plan of Action on Population and Poverty, adopted at the 5th Asian and Pacific Population Conference (APPC), was held in Bangkok from 3 to 5 February. It was organized by the Social Policy and Population Section, Social Development Division, UN Economic and Social Commission in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in collaboration with the UNFPA Asia and the Pacific Regional Office.

The EGM observed that some progress had been made in the implementation of the Plan of Action but much remained to be done. In order to further accelerate progress towards achieving the Fifth APPC Plan of Action, the EGM adopted a set of recommendations relating to population dynamics, sustainable development, poverty, health, gender equality, migration and partnerships.

The EGM called on ESCAP and UNFPA to "pursue their strategic partnership for the purpose of accelerating progress towards the achievement of the Fifth APPC and ICPD goals, in particular through policy support, advocacy and strengthened knowledge-sharing activities."

At the regional and country level, targeted and pro-poor interventions must be adopted to mitigate the potential negative impacts of the global economic crisis and other threats to development such as climate change and environmental degradation. The group also highlighted the need to mainstream gender and to incorporate a rights-based approach in key policies and programmes in all areas



From left: Mr. G. Giridhar, Special Adviser and UNFPA Representative in Thailand; Mr. Tomas M. Osias, Executive Director, Commission on Population, the Philippines; Ms. Thelma Kay, Director, Social Development Division, UNESCAP, Bangkok; Ms. Keiko Osaki, Chief, Social Policy and Population Section, Social Development Section, UNESCAP, Bangkok

and to monitor it through regional and national mechanisms.

The group produced specific recommendations, including on population, sustainable development and poverty. The group called for the strengthening of "national capacity to pursue human capital development while integrating population concerns into the broader development agenda, particularly into strategies for poverty reduction and achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals."

It also recommended to "enhance efforts in pursuing gender equality and women's empowerment as a fundamental goal and essential part of the strategy of poverty reduction and promotion of sustainable development." In particular, there is a need to "enhance educational opportunities for girls, particularly those from poor families, in countries where female educational enrolment and retention rates are lagging behind those of males, also ensuring quality education."

Promoting rural development is also important in helping to alleviate

poverty, reduce the pressure of rural-to-urban migration, and reverse current environmental degradation. Experts called for advocating the regional commitment to work towards environmental sustainability, through investments in new energy technologies.

Finally, the meeting agreed that countries should "foster development strategies that provide productive employment opportunities to young people, particularly those in low-income households as a means to alleviate poverty, recognizing that this needs to be closely linked with efforts to increase their educational levels and develop their skills, in both formal and informal settings."

In a panel session chaired by Dr. Raj Karim, Regional Director for IPPF, AFPPD Executive Director Shiv Khare shared AFPPD's experience in fostering effective partnerships with parliamentarians in the pursuit of the 5th APPC/ICPD goals. Mr. Wasim Zaman, new Executive Director of ICOMP and Mr. Harree Jooseery, Executive Director of Partners in Population and Development, also spoke on partnerships with civil society on achieving the ICPD goals. ■

PARLIAMENTARIANS AT GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND SRH CONFERENCE

GBV is a Human Rights and Public Health Concern



From left: Dr. Anusak Kongmalai, Senator, Thailand; Ms. Hajah Nancy Shukri, MP, Malaysia; and Mrs. Jaya Bachchan, MP, India

Over 300 participants from governments, civil society and the UN gathered in Mumbai, India, from 15-18 February for the International Conference on Gender-based Violence and Sexual and

Reproductive Health. The conference was organized by the National Institute for Research in Reproductive Health, UNDP/UNFPA/WHO/World Bank Special Programme of Research, Development and Research Training in Human Reproduction and the Indian Society for the Study of Reproduction and Fertility.

AFPPD organized a parliamentarian's panel on "monitoring gender-based violence and programme implementation" to review the implementation strategies adopted in various countries and examine other ways to ensure implementation. Moderated by Mr. Manmohan Sharma, Executive Secretary of the IAPPD, the panel featured Mrs. Jaya Bachchan, famous former

actress and now MP of India, as well as Dr. Anusak Kongmalai, Senator, Thailand, and Ms. Hajah Nancy Shukri, MP, Malaysia.

The panel discussion highlighted AFPPD's and its national parliamentary committees' instrumental role in initiating and getting legislation regarding gender-based violence approved. It was noted that while most parliaments in Asia and the Pacific have approved such legislations, implementation of these legislation still needs to be enhanced and improved. The panelists also emphasized that legislations alone cannot eliminate gender-based violence. To do so requires fundamental changes in social norms and public attitude towards women. ■

Women's Empowerment Gains Must be Protected and Built Upon During the Economic Crisis



From left: Ms. Jean D'Cunha (moderator), Regional Programme Director, UNIFEM East and South East Asia; Mr. Srawoath Paitoonpong, Senior Research Specialist at the Thailand Development Research Institute; Ms. Shamika Sirimanne, Chief of ESCAP'S Trade Facilitation Section; Ms. Lucia Victor Jayaseelan, Executive Coordinator of the Committee for Asian Women

Though women have contributed significantly to the Asia-Pacific region's economy, they have borne a larger brunt of the economic downturn with unemployment and underemployment rising. As a result, it is crucial to protect the gains made in empowering women and to include a stronger focus on gender investment in any planned response to the economic crisis.

These were among the key messages heard at the UN celebration of International Women's Day in Bangkok, where the theme of "Gender Implications of the Economic Crisis in Asia-Pacific" was explored. The event was organized by the UN Economic and Social Commission in Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) with the support of other UN offices in Bangkok under the United Nations Regional Coordination Mechanism. The event took place on 9 March at the United Nations Conference Center in Bangkok, and featured a moderated panel discussion.

Economic Crisis Hits Women Hard

Globalization has led to greater female employment in both formal settings as well as informal settings such as street vending and home garment production. "Women have in fact emerged as the flexible labour force par excellence for highly competitive labour-intensive sectors of the global economy," said Dr. Noeleen Heyzer, Under-Secretary-General of the UN and Executive Secretary of ESCAP. "They are now embedded in the global supply chain. Yet flexible labour is insecure labour: low-skilled, temporary and casual."



Dr. Noeleen Heyzer

Secretary of ESCAP. "They are now embedded in the global supply chain. Yet flexible labour is insecure labour: low-skilled, temporary and casual."

Dr. Heyzer noted that among the hardest hit by the current economic crisis are the trade, manufacturing and services sectors, which are female dominated. Unskilled women migrant workers are particularly affected, with reports in the region indicating that women constitute the majority of migrants returning to their country of origin due to job loss.

A number of panelists discussed the fact that the effects of the economic crisis on women are channeled across many spheres: increased household expenditures such as food; unemployment and income loss or reduction; reduced access to credit; lower government expenditures especially on social services; and protectionism and economic nationalism. The panelists remarked how - within households - women are also largely responsible for making ends meet, feeding and caring for their family members on declining incomes, while absorbing the bulk of family sacrifices. Economic stress on a family tends to increase a woman's susceptibility to domestic violence. It also puts women at greater risk of human trafficking through their efforts to secure income or pay off debt.

Stimulus Plans Must Empower Women

Asia and the Pacific have responded to the economic crisis with financial rescue packages that contain many pro-poor social protection measures, but - as some panelists pointed out - do not directly address the impact on women. Participants agreed on the importance of focusing not only on the effects of the crisis on women, but also on women as economic agents in responding to and preventing future crises, including through participation in decision-making processes and leadership in corporate governance.

The current development of national stimulus packages was viewed as a unique window of opportunity to channel investment for women's empowerment

into areas such as job creation and unemployment assistance, as well as into support for education, health services and agricultural extension, which also have longterm benefits for women and girls. Participants underscored the need to avoid funding cuts to - or diversion from - public spending on social sectors.

Responsibility of Men

In reference to the global theme of International Women's Day - "Women and men united to end violence against women and girls" - the role of men was also highlighted in the context of working in partnership with women to end gender-based violence through changing the mindsets of boys and men. Many male participants remarked on their personal commitments as husbands and fathers to reject social acceptance of violence against women.

Mr. Gary Lewis, Regional Representative of the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), appealed to men, "who have control over the public purse: let us continue to educate our girl children." Educated women are more likely to speak out against injustice and claim their rights, Mr. Lewis added. Ms. Wassana Im-Em, Assistant Representative of UNFPA in Thailand also spoke on UNFPA's programme to engage men to end violence against women.

Protecting the gains made, and making further investments in gender equality, is a fast track to development, especially in times of economic downturns. Many initiatives are low cost and low risk, yet yield high returns. In the words of Dr. Heyzer, "Investment in women and girls is fundamental not only to gender equality and women's empowerment, but essential to poverty reduction and development."

Ms. Gwi-Yeop Son, United Nations Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Thailand also addressed the gathering. (UN Info Services) ■

4TH SAT PAUL MITTAL MEMORIAL LECTURE IN INDIA

Mr. Anrudh K. Jain of the Population Council in New York delivered the 4th Sat Paul Mittal Memorial lecture, named after one of the founders of AFPPD, at Jawaharlal University in New Delhi, India, on 15 September 2008. We are reproducing parts of his lecture on policy implications:

Social justice, fertility transition, and the demographic dividend are closely interlinked, but the actual experience varies from state to state. Those states that made earlier investments in social development experienced fertility transition early and are now ready to start reaping the benefit from the changing age composition or the demographic dividend. On the other hand, those states that did not invest adequately in social development early are now lagging behind in fertility transition and will not benefit from the demographic dividend in the near future. The latter also have a backlog in educating young children. They will have to continue to invest in education and health of young population and thus will have an ongoing need for additional resources and political commitment to improve the education and health status of their young population. Consequently, these states will have no potential savings which they could invest in improving the economic conditions of their people.

At the national level, recent changes in the age distribution, in theory, could enhance the government's ability to improve the well-being of the people in India. In practice, however, we cannot depend upon these changes alone to achieve the overall objective of improving the health

and education of the people throughout India. As mentioned earlier, the quantity of the work force is certain to increase with a decline in fertility. But the increase the productivity of the work force would require investments to improve the quality (education and skills) of this work force and to expand opportunities for them to use their skills productively.

According to the policy and budgeting framework, potential savings, due to changes in the age distribution, in the resources required for education and health in one state cannot be transferred to another state. Mechanisms must, therefore, be developed that allow such transfers to take place or else national programmes must disproportionately allocate resources needed to states lagging behind in social development. In addition, it is important for the richer states to help the poorer states through direct transfer of resources and technical assistance in the same way as assistance has been flowing from the richer to poorer countries. This transfer can be adequately justified on the basis of social responsibility and economic justice. There is also a vested interest since poor economic and social structures in some parts of the country can hold back the entire nation. Furthermore, improvements in the economic conditions of the poorer states will reduce migration from the poorer to the richer states of the country.



INDONESIA

Advocacy Meeting with Women Political Candidates



From left: Ms. Maemunah Zein, parliamentarian candidate from National Awakening Party; Ms. Aida Milasai, resource person on Gender Equality and Equity, CEDAW Working Group Initiative; Dr. Kartono Mohamad, resource person on MDGs Issues for Legislative Campaign

As the election nears in Indonesia, the Indonesian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (IFPPD) as an organization that conducts parliamentary advocacy held an advocacy meeting with women candidates for parliament and political cadres of the National Awakening Party. IFPPD facilitated the discussion with political parties to disseminate issues on population, reproductive health and gender, and other strategic issues in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

The advocacy meeting was held at the office of the National Awakening Party on 25 February and was attended by women candidates for the parliament from several constituent regions. The theme of the meeting was the "Latest Issues on Population and Development: Eradicating Poverty and Gender Inequality."

The resource persons for this dialogue were Dr. Kartono Mohamad who spoke on "MDGs' Issues for Legislative Campaign" and Ms. Aida Milasari, from the CEDAW Working Group Initiative, who shared her insight on "Gender Equality and Equity for Women."

The candidates brought up questions and the challenges they see at the grassroots level during their campaign in the constituent regions, particularly on the role of women in community development. This is the first advocacy meeting in 2009 and will be followed by five more advocacy meetings with the major parties. (IFPPD)

THE PHILIPPINES

MPs Push for RH Bill Passage

The Philippines Legislators Committee on Population and Development Foundation, Inc. (PLCPD), an AFPPD affiliate, convened a forum in Mandaluyong City on 27 February to support the RH Bill now pending in Congress. The forum gathered representatives from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), European Commission, Spanish Cooperation Agency, the World Health Organization, local group Forum on Reproductive Health, and the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

Rep. Edcel C. Lagman, a co-author of the bill and Deputy Secretary-General of AFPPD, is hopeful that President Arroyo would back the measure. International donor agencies have repeatedly voiced their support for the controversial RH Bill.

"I don't think the President would reject

this... If the President will veto this bill, then she would be giving the people the wrong legacy," Mr. Lagman said.

If passed, House Bill No. 5043 or the Reproductive Health and Population Development Act of 2008, would advance the response to many population concerns, particularly in reducing unwanted pregnancies and induced abortions. Supporters also said that the bill would not only provide sexuality education but also access to reproductive health services.

Mr. Lagman cited a recent Pulse Asia survey showing 22 percent of Filipinos want to mitigate their fertility and plan their pregnancy while a related Social Weather Station survey said 71 percent of Filipinos favor the RH Bill and a law that would teach sexuality education in public and private schools. ■

Japan MPs and Experts Discuss Child Poverty and Afghanistan



MPs (from left): Ms. Aiko Shimajiri, Mr. Ichiro Tsukada, Mr. Eiichi Yamashita, Mr. Daishiro Yamagiwa, Mr. Yuji Sawa, and Ms. Yoko Komiyama

Members of the Japan Parliamentarians Federation for Population (JPPF) convened for two Committee Meetings in February, where they discussed social matters with experts.

Dr. Aya Abe, Senior Researcher at the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, addressed the topic of child poverty rates in Japan to the Committee for Domestic Measures. Child poverty has been a low-profile issue in Japan but according to an OECD survey, the child poverty rate in Japan stands



Dr. Aya Abe

higher than the average among developed nations. She expressed her concerns that poverty in childhood leaves children economically disadvantaged in all stages of their lives, adversely affecting their health and education. Surveys also show that there is a close link between poverty and child abuse. As such, poverty is passed down from generation to generation.

Dr. Abe recommends that a combination of measures (e.g. no tuition fees for secondary education, more scholarships for higher education, improvement of public education, expansion of nursery systems, increasing child allowances) be taken to address these issues, and participating parliamentarians appreciated the data and insight provided to them.

On the second occasion, Dr. Naghizadeh Mohammad, Professor at the Meiji Gakuin University, spoke to the Committee on International Cooperation. Dr. Naghizadeh was awarded the Japanese Order of the Sacred Treasure last year and is a member of the Board of Councillors of APDA. As an Iranian and specialist in Agricultural Economics and Development, he shared the results of his surveys on Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, and stressed the urgency of the Afghan reconstruction and agricultural development to stabilize the region,

involving Iran and Japan within this process.

Illegal opium cultivation still continues since an influx of wheat from the U.S. caused such a drastic fall of its prices that Afghan farmers can hardly earn a livelihood by growing wheat. Besides the large gap in profits between wheat and opium, Afghanistan's scarce water resources turn farmers to opium production, which requires less water than wheat.

Dr. Naghizadeh expects that Japan, in cooperation with Iran, will play a more active role in non-military cooperation such as technical assistance in the reconstruction and development of agricultural and water resources, production of an alternative crop to opium, and support for infrastructure, education and medical services.

Both lectures were informative and due to their success, the Asian Population and Development Association (APDA) will be arranging more speakers in the near future. (APDA) ■



Dr. Naghizadeh Mohammad

TIMOR-LESTE

UNDP & UNIFEM Support Women MPs in Timor-Leste

A new project of UNDP and UNIFEM aims to support women parliamentarians in Timor-Leste. The project's centerpiece is the Centro de Estudos de Genero (CEG) or Gender Resource Centre.

The CEG is a three-year US\$700,000 initiative of the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus, or the Grupo das Mulheres Parlamentares de Timor-Leste, a women's lobby within the National Parliament. It is supported by UNDP's Parliament Project and UNIFEM through its Integrated Programme for Women in Politics and in

Decision Making (IPWPDM), a five-year undertaking designed to aid and enhance women's participation in politics and decision making.

According to Ms. Maria Paixao Da Costa, the Vice-President of Parliament and the President of the lobby group, the CEG is "seen as institutionalizing commitment to struggle for gender equality and women's empowerment in the country."

Integrating a gender perspective into the work of the National Parliament through

capacity development, research, training and networking activities with other organizations is the core objective of the CEG, established through the sponsorship of Norway, Sweden and Australia.

Meanwhile, Mr. Fernando La Sama, the President of the National Parliament, used the launch of the CEG to affirm "Parliament's commitment towards the attainment of gender equality and women's empowerment in this country." He added that it was "everybody's responsibility" to advance this cause. (UN News) ■

THE CARIBBEAN

Caribbean Parliamentarians Network Established

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) & the Inter-American Parliamentary Group on Population and Development (IAPG) have formed a network of Caribbean Parliamentarians on Population and Development to promote population and reproductive health issues at the government level in the region.

The group's formation came out of a two-day meeting held in Suriname late last year when the UNFPA brought together over twenty parliamentarians

from ten countries and territories across the Caribbean to discuss population and development issues.

"The members of the network have committed to promoting population and reproductive health and rights as well as gender issues and to place them on the public agenda," said Mr. Harold Robinson, UNFPA Director of the sub-regional office for the English and Dutch Speaking Caribbean.

According to Mr. Robinson, the initiative

fulfills one of UNFPA's main strategies to establish partnerships to tackle major issues that impact people's lives and the achievement of the ICPD agenda and the MDGs.

As a first step, the group elected Ms. Deborah Mencias McMillan from Belize as Coordinator of the network, Ms. Malaka Parker, from Antigua and Barbuda, as Secretary and Ms. Volda Lawrence, from Guyana, as their representative to the Board of the IAPG. (Panos Caribbean)

PARLIAMENTARIANS AT OECD MEETING

OECD & MPs Discuss Financial Crisis

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) convened a High Level Parliamentary Seminar on the Financial and Economic Crisis at its headquarters in Paris on 19 February.

This seminar provided an opportunity for parliamentarians and legislators to exchange views with their colleagues and OECD experts on the OECD's strategic response to the financial and economic crisis with particular reference to corporate governance, taxation, open markets for trade and investment, and the employment

and social impact of the crisis. In particular, the seminar focused on OECD's response to the crisis, social aspects of the crisis, sovereign wealth funds, tax implications and corporate governance.

AFFPD arranged the participation of Dr. Souvanpheng Boupphanouvong, Member of the National Assembly of Lao PDR. Dr. Boupphanouvong is the Vice Chair of both the Economic Planning and Finance Committee in the National Assembly and the National Secretariat Committee for Women's Progress. ■

SPAIN AND AFRICA

Spanish MPs Visit Senegal

From 25-30 January, the Spanish Interest Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (SIG) and UNFPA organised a study tour to Dakar and the northern regions of Senegal. The tour included three members of the Spanish Congress and three representatives from regional technical cooperation bodies. A second group formed by members of the Catalan Parliament and representatives of the Catalan Government will have the

opportunity to participate in a second UNFPA study tour to Senegal, this time to Dakar and the southern regions of Senegal, towards the end of April.

The aim of the trip was to provide participants with a better understanding of the sexual and reproductive health and rights situation and the needs in Senegal and the work of UNFPA and other Spanish institutions in the field. (SIG) ■

UN POPULATION AWARDS

Egyptian Doctor and Nicaraguan NGO Receive 2009 Population Awards

An Egyptian doctor, Dr. Mahmoud Fathalla, and a Nicaraguan non-governmental organization, Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense (MCN), have won this year's United Nations Population Award. The Award is given to individuals and institutions for outstanding work in population and in improving the health of individuals.

The Award Committee, chaired by

Malaysia's Ambassador to the United Nations, Mr. Hamidon Ali, chose the laureates from 18 international nominees. The Committee consists of 10 United Nations Member States, with UNFPA serving as its secretariat.

The awards are due to be presented on Monday, 1 June, at the United Nations, New York. Each winner will receive a diploma and a gold medal. ■

U.S. AID POLICY

U.S. Releases Funds for UNFPA



U.S. President Barack Obama

In line with the Obama administration's promise to restore funding to family planning services, the State Department has recently released \$50 million in funds to UNFPA, the UN body which supports programmes around the world to advance poor women's reproductive health. This action follows President Obama's announcement in January of his commitment to restore U.S. financial support of the fund. ■

AUSTRALIA

Australia Overturns Abortion Aid Ban

Australia has lifted a controversial ban on using overseas aid to fund family planning programmes offering abortions, Foreign Minister Stephen Smith announced on 11 March. The move came as Australian scientists hailed a decision by US President Barack Obama to overturn his predecessor's ban on federal funding for embryonic stem cell research.

The Australian Reproductive Health Alliance and the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population and Development have been campaigning to remove all restrictions on Australian aid for SRH. ■

European and Francophone Parliamentarians Meet on HIV/AIDS



On the 23-24 February, the European Parliamentary Forum (EPF) was invited to speak in Mali at the annual meeting of the HIV/AIDS Networks of the Parliamentary Assembly for "la Francophonie" (PAF) hosted by its Malian Section. The HIV/AIDS Network of the PAF gathered around 40 European and African Parliamentarians as well as UNAIDS representatives in order to exchange points of view and best practices in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The main themes of this year's annual

conference were 'affective and sexual education among young girls and boys' as well as 'the difficulties related to the shortage of skilled health care and medical personnel and the brain drain challenges'. During the two-day meeting, parliamentarians were able to present their countries' achievements and remaining challenges in the fight against HIV/AIDS and brainstorm about the best ways to overcome difficulties.

There were key discussions on HIV/AIDS awareness-raising among young people and the challenges related to sexual education which still remains "taboo" in most of African countries. Sensitive issues included the issue of "men having sex with men," which led to a lively debate on the existing repressive laws condemning homosexuality in numerous African

countries, as well as the difficulties related to sex workers' access to prevention and treatment.

EPF was invited to speak and share its expertise with Parliamentarians members of the PAF. Ms Silvia Theodoridis, EPF advocacy officer, presented the work EPF is carrying out in order to engage and mobilise European Parliamentarians in health related-issues and the implementation of the Cairo Plan of Action focusing particularly on women's health and rights, including SRHR, HIV/AIDS and Malaria.

Highlighting the existing linkages between these issues, as well as the remaining challenges, EPF's presentation provided strategies for the future and emphasized the need to mainstream policies in order to obtain successful results and meet the MDGs. Finally, parliamentarians adopted a Resolution highlighting a possible enhanced collaboration between APF and EPF in the future. (EPF) ■

CENTRAL ASIA

Conference on International Standards for Gender Policies

The Government of Turkmenistan with the support of UNFPA Regional Office for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) is convening an international conference entitled "International standards for gender policies," from 13-14 April 2009 in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan.

The National Institute of Democracy and Human Rights will be the hosting

agency of the Conference on behalf of the Government of Turkmenistan.

This conference will provide an opportunity for interactive and participatory learning and sharing. Expert facilitators will lead three thematic sessions, including successes and challenges for developing and implementing gender-responsive and gender-specific legislation; strategies for

women empowerment; and gender and rights for reproductive health.

Participants of the Conference will include Government officials, representatives from relevant ministries and Parliamentarians from countries in the CIS and Turkey. AFPPD Secretary-General Dr. Pinit Kullavanijaya, Senator of Thailand, will attend the conference. ■

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