



## Diffusing the Population “Bomb” Demography and Security

At first glance, it's easy to blame the tragedy in Darfur on racial tension. Over the past decade, the grasslands of the northern Sahel—a semiarid region that stretches across Africa from Senegal to Sudan—have turned to desert, pushing Arab herders into forested areas historically inhabited by black subsistence farmers. Government troops support Arab militias, who drive farmers off their land, slaughtering entire villages in the process, staging a massive humanitarian crisis.

Declining rainfall and overgrazing are responsible for the expansion of the Sahara desert into the Sahel. But before desertification began, Sudan's spectacular population growth set the stage for environmental collapse. From 1950 to 2007, Sudan's population grew from 9 million to 39 million and the number of livestock grazing in northern Sudan increased from 21 million to over 150 million during the same period.<sup>1</sup> As rainfall decreased and livestock ate the remaining vegetation, the desert quickly advanced, pushing the herders south.

The crisis in Darfur has roots in a complex confluence of social, environmental, and historical forces. But it is undeniable that rapid population growth underlines the tragedy that has already left as many as 450,000 dead and threatens to destabilize the entire region.<sup>2</sup>

### Failed States

Failed States—characterized by weak governance, lawlessness, and internal conflict—typically suffer from high population growth. Seventeen of the top twenty failing states, as determined by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's *Failed States Index*, have rapid population growth rates, many expanding at close to three percent per year. In five of these countries, women have an average of seven children each.<sup>3</sup>

This rapid growth overwhelms eco-

nomics development that could help countries move through the demographic transition, from high birth and death rates to low birth and death rates.

### Youth Bulge

The presence of a disproportionately large young population—or a “youth bulge”—can portend dire consequences for state stability. The combination of rapid growth in the youth population and stagnating labor markets creates a situation of discontent, and is widely acknowledged as a risk to state stability.<sup>4</sup>

Unemployment rates for youth have risen to over double the overall unemployment rates worldwide, and the youth unemployment rates for the Middle East and North Africa are the highest in the world.<sup>5</sup>

Countries with youth bulges are 2.5 times more likely to have an outbreak of civil conflict than countries with more even age distributions.<sup>6</sup> In the next two decades, the youth populations in Iraq,

Yemen, and the Palestinian Territories will grow the fastest in the world. These three places have the highest fertility rates in the region, and over 40 percent of their populations are currently under 15 years of age.<sup>7</sup>

### Land and Resource Scarcity

Darfur demonstrates how environmental scarcity combined with population growth can bring about conflict. Somalia and Haiti are failed states with widespread deforestation, grassland deterioration, and soil erosion. The Sahel is turning to desert in Nigeria, pitting Muslims against Christians; and in Mali, forcing black farmers to contend with ethnic Tuareg and Fulani herders. The competition for land, amplified by religious and ethnic differences, and combined with a large number of frustrated young men, was described in the *New York Times* as a “combustible mix” that has led to repeated outbreaks of violence.<sup>8</sup>



Tear gas explodes on a street outside the state university during a political demonstration in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Photo: Amelia Shaw/Agence des Jeunes Producteurs, Courtesy of Photoshare



A peacekeeper supervises displaced children in eastern Congo. Photo: Felix Masi/Voiceless Children, Courtesy of Photoshare

### Simple Answers, Urgent Actions

The only way to ease potentially volatile demographic pressures is to tackle population growth head-on. Unfortunately, political will has been lacking of late. International support for family planning has fallen dramatically short of common goals agreed upon in Cairo at the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in 1994.<sup>9</sup>

According to Lester Brown, founder of the Earth Policy Institute, meeting family planning needs may be the most urgent item on the global agenda, because the benefits are enormous and the costs are minimal.<sup>10</sup> Women's empowerment can also play a large role in lowering fertility rates in countries still struggling for equality. In the words of Richard Cincotta, consulting demographer to the Long Range Analysis Unit of the National Intelligence Council (NIC), "The lesson of the last 30 years is that where women are educated and have opportunities to work outside the home, fertility declines quite rapidly—no matter what the religious or ethnic background."<sup>11</sup>

### Success Stories

In 1964, Tunisia established an ambitious family planning program that incor-

porated reproductive health care into basic health care. When the program first began, Tunisia's total fertility rate was over 7 children per woman. Today, women have an average of 1.86 children—fewer than American women. Tunisia is less vulnerable to conflict than its neighbors, largely thanks to the pacifying effects of decades of slower population growth.

The Islamic Republic of Iran began to address its population challenges in the 1990s. The government developed a comprehensive sex education curriculum for high school students and requires all university students to take a course on population and development. Premarital contraceptive counseling is mandatory for all engaged couples in Iran.<sup>12</sup> These programs have been instituted in the face of conservative social and religious pressures, proving that religion does not have to be an obstacle to family planning. Iranian women now have an average of 1.83 children each.<sup>13</sup>

### The Way Forward

In an increasingly interconnected world with rising numbers of failed states, the problem of overpopulation and its simple solutions should move to the top of the global agenda.

A new report<sup>14</sup> by five former directors of USAID's Office of Population and Reproductive Health, makes the case for increasing international family planning funding from \$545 million to \$1.2 billion. To learn more about our campaign to *Double the Money*, visit our website at [www.populationconnection.org](http://www.populationconnection.org).

#### Sources:

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- <sup>5</sup> Ragui Assaad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, 2007, "Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge?" *Population Reference Bureau MENA Policy Brief*.
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- <sup>8</sup> Lester Brown. 2008. *Plan B 3.0 – Mobilizing to Save Civilization*. New York: W.W. Norton, p. 118.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
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- <sup>13</sup> Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2008 Revision*, <http://esa.un.org/unpp>.
- <sup>14</sup> Speidel, J.J. et al, *Making the Case for U.S. International Family Planning Assistance*. Johns Hopkins University. 2009

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*Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.*