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News Bureau

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U.S. RANKS 27th IN “REPORT CARD” ON WORLD SOCIAL PROGRESS; AFRICA IN DIRE STRAITS

Note to editors: Dr. Estes is available for interviews by telephone. In addition, he is available for in-person interviews this month in Paris, Berlin, Frankfurt and Munich.

FRANKFURT -- Denmark and Sweden lead the world in social progress, Afghanistan is at the bottom of the list and the United States ranks 27th among 163 nations, according to the latest Index of Social Progress.

These “world social report” figures were released today by Richard Estes of the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work at the Fifth International Conference of the International Society for Life Quality Studies. Addressing social-development and quality-of-life specialists at the conference, Estes said, “A handful of nations are doing very well, but many are struggling just to meet basic needs. The last decade has seen a sharp deterioration in overall life quality for vast segments of the world’s population, especially for people living in the poorest nations of Africa and Asia. Even people in previously well-off countries are not doing as well today.”

The nations comprising the top 10 are Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Luxembourg, Germany, Austria, Iceland, Italy and Belgium, and the bottom 10 are Afghanistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Angola, Liberia, Niger, Guinea, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire).

In the U.S., Estes, who has researched world social development for 30 years, found the pace of social development to be “on hold” since 1980, putting the U.S. on the same level as Poland and Slovenia in the current “report card.”

“Chronic poverty is the greatest threat to social progress in the United States,” Estes said. “More than 33 million Americans -- almost 12 million of them children -- are poor.”

“Contrary to public perception,” Estes said, “the majority of poor in the United States are members of established family households who work full-time and are white. No other economically advanced country tolerates such a level of poverty.”

Other challenges impeding American social progress include slow economic growth, increasing unemployment, insecure access for many people to adequate health care and deteriorating schools in many urban areas.

Estes identified 21 African and Asian countries nearing “social collapse” due to concentrated poverty, weak political institutions, repeated economic failure, disease and cultural isolation.

“These roadblocks to progress,” he said, “are contributing to global social unrest, including religious fundamentalism and terrorism. Rich countries ignore the desperate plight of the world poorest nations at our own risk.”

Using data provided primarily by national governments to the United Nations and the World Bank, Estes’s study measures the ability of nations to meet the needs of their residents for health, education, human rights, political participation, population growth, improved women’s status, cultural diversity and freedom from “social chaos.” Military spending and environmental protection are also among the 40 factors used to tabulate his Weighted Index of Social Progress.

Current social conditions, Estes said, are especially poor in Middle, West and East Africa.

“Not only are the conditions there the lowest in the world but they are worse today than in 1990,” he said, citing recurrent economic failure, corrupt public

administration, ethnic conflicts, protracted intra-regional wars and the absence of viable civil institutions.

The most rapid social-development improvements are taking place in South Central and Western Asia. Estes associated this with the emergence of democratic institutions in the region's newly independent countries and the vast oil wealth of Iran, Iraq, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Also contributing to the improvement in Asia were significant reductions in military spending which allowed higher investments in education and health and advancing the economic status of women.

But, Estes warned, "Asia's high population-growth rates, deep poverty, tendencies toward extremism and political repression could undermine the region's future social and economic development progress."

Estes contrasted recent development trends occurring in China and India, the world's two population giants.

"Social development in China," he said, "now surpasses that of India, and the pace of social improvement in China is much more rapid."

China moved from 73rd place in 1980 to 69th place, and India dropped 26 ranks to 111th. Estes pointed to China's decade-long, double-digit rate of economic growth, success in slowing population growth and the steady, if tentative, emergence of certain types of "civil society" institutions as important components of China's overall social development success, despite China's "smothering political system."

Development trends in India reflect increased difficulty in managing social conflict, health care, environmental degradation, weakening economic conditions and further losses in the already low status of women.

"India's formula for development -- high military spending in combination with pervasive poverty -- is one that predicts disaster," Estes said.

Estes characterized the pace of social progress in Latin America as "lackluster, citing no change since 1970 in the social situation in most Caribbean and Central American nations, where large segments of the people are poor.

He also said, "Advances in European social development remained at a virtual standstill throughout much of the 1990s."

Sluggish economic growth, high unemployment, low fertility, rapid population aging and expensive welfare arrangements are limiting the ability of many European countries to compete in the new global economy, Estes said.

Estes will publish his full report later this year in a book, "At the Crossroads: Development Challenges of the New Century" (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers).

Additional Resources For the Media:

Electronic copies of this release and supporting tables and charts may be downloaded from: caster.ssw.upenn.edu/~restes/world.html