

Africa stagnates while world gets richer-UNDP

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By Gordon Bell

CAPE TOWN, Nov 9 (Reuters) - The world as a whole has seen unprecedented growth over the past 30 years, but the prosperity has not been evenly shared and AIDS-ravaged sub-Saharan Africa in particular is stagnating, a U.N. development report said.

"When it comes to human development, the rising tide of global prosperity has lifted some boats faster than others, and some boats are sinking faster," the U.N.'s Human Development Index (HDI) for 2006 said.

The index -- which rates countries on wealth, life expectancy and education -- ranked Norway as the best country in which to live and Niger in West Africa at the bottom, unchanged from last year.

"People in Norway are more than 40 times wealthier than people in Niger and they live almost twice as long," the report said.

The combined income of the 500 richest people in the world now exceeds that of the poorest 416 million people, while in the HDI's 31 lowest ranked countries -- covering 9 percent of the world's population -- average life expectancy is 46 years, or 32 years less than the highest ranking nations.

An estimated one billion people do not have access to clean water and 2.6 billion people have no sanitation.

"Being born on the wrong street in the global village carries with it a large risk in terms of survival prospects," the report said.

Sub-Saharan Africa, where tens of millions of people face a devastating AIDS pandemic and chronic shortages of clean water and sanitation, was particularly hard hit.

AIDS, WATER

Life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa is sharply lower now than it was in the 1970s,

due to HIV/AIDS. The region accounts for almost two thirds of the estimated 40 million people infected with HIV worldwide.

A person in Swaziland, a tiny southern African kingdom, can expect to live to 31.3 years of age, while in neighbouring South Africa, the continent's most advanced economy, average life expectancy is only 47. That compares to 82.2 years in Japan.

"In terms of the human development index itself obviously the single biggest factor that has driven the reversals that we've seen in sub-Saharan Africa has been HIV/AIDS," the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report's lead author, Kevin Watkins, told reporters in Cape Town.

AIDS kills hundreds of thousands each year, while an estimated 2 million children die annually from illnesses linked to dirty water, he said.

Speaking at the launch of the report in Cape Town, South African President Thabo Mbeki said inequality was starkly manifest in the lack of basic needs, such as clean water and sanitation, for billions of poor people.

"(The report) must help us respond to the real and dire conditions of the poor with regard to adequate access to water and sanitation, not with lofty words but concrete actions," he said.

Mbeki said Africa could learn from the example of the European Union by cooperating to improve the standards of the region's rivers and sharing valuable water resources.

The index, first published in 1990, measured statistics from 175 countries and Hong Kong and the Palestinian territories.

Iceland, Australia, Ireland and Sweden completed the list of top five countries, with Sierra Leone, Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau -- all African states -- holding up the rear.

It did not, however, measure several nations including Afghanistan and Iraq due to insufficient data.