

Proclaiming Jubilee—for whom?

by [Robert Snyder](#) in the [June 30, 1999](#) issue

Jubilee 2000 is gaining momentum. Centers for the movement have arisen in more than 40 countries, and numerous churches and nongovernmental organizations have signed on to the campaign. The goals of this movement, which seems to have originated with the All Africa Conference of Churches and is now centered in the United Kingdom, are best summed up in the apostolic letter issued by Pope John Paul II in 1994. It states: "In the spirit of the Book of Leviticus (25:8-12), Christians will have to raise their voice on behalf of all the poor of the world, proposing the Jubilee as an appropriate time to give thought, among other things, to reducing substantially, if not canceling outright, the international debt which seriously threatens the future of many nations." (See related story, page 670.)

The idea is appealing. After all, there is no such thing as an international bankruptcy court which allows hopelessly indebted countries to declare themselves insolvent. Countries that have no hope of ever paying off their debt languish in a state of perpetual penury. The people of these countries barely eke out a living, while the banks owned by the wealthy prosper.

The world's financial institutions have recognized that something needs to be done to change this situation. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently started the Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) initiative, which singles out countries undergoing extreme financial stress. On the list are many African nations, including Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Each country must pass a second screening to be eligible to receive some debt relief.

The Jubilee 2000 people claim that the relief proposed by the IMF is not enough. It does indeed seem to fall far short of what is needed. However, the concept proposed by Jubilee 2000 is riddled with pitfalls; to apply it universally would be naïve.

The economies of the heavily indebted countries would clearly benefit from debt relief. In countries with benevolent governments, the citizenry on the whole would gain. However, the socioeconomic structure of some of the heavily indebted nations is such that, in the long term, debt relief might only aggravate the condition of the

poor.

As a former agricultural missionary in east and central Africa, I've learned that quick fixes can sometimes become excuses for not dealing with the more painful fundamentals of international and national problems. A poorly executed act of sympathy can exacerbate the problem that it is meant to solve. Consider Rwanda.

Until 1994 Rwanda was under the rule of President Juvénal Habyarimana. Generally, Westerners liked him. From the perspective of international agencies, he was at worst a benevolent dictator, at best a progressive peacemaker promoting development. Compared to many African countries, Rwanda experienced a time of stability and growth during Habyarimana's rule. We now realize, however, that he was a cunning power broker and, to a certain degree, a racist. He made sure that the benefits of international aid projects accrued mainly either to his extended family or to the northwestern region of Rwanda from which he came.

The people of Rwanda's southern half were well aware of this inequity. All Rwandans had to carry identity cards that showed their ethnicity. If you were Tutsi, you faced discrimination whether you were from the north or the south. Though 10 to 15 percent of the population was Tutsi, no Tutsi was allowed to hold a leadership position in government or the military. A small group of Tutsi ran profitable business enterprises, but they were well aware that the price for the freedom to carry on business was not to interfere with or criticize Habyarimana's dictatorial hold. Rwanda's leaders drained the economy into their own bank accounts, while making sure that no opponent could get enough political strength to challenge the status quo. Habyarimana manicured his image for Western donors, and aid dollars poured in. The government and the army put on a friendly face to those of us working in the country.

The Rwandans were not fooled by this political masquerade. They understood the rules of the game, according to the former Rwandan minister of defense, James Gasana, who escaped from Rwanda in 1993. An insightful moderate, he would probably have been killed for his political stance by the powers that eventually led to the 1994 genocide. In a paper presented at the Ecumenical Institute in Bossey, Switzerland, in 1996, Gasana stated that the Rwandan army served only one purpose: to protect the power elite. This is not unique to Rwanda. Says Steven Were Omamo of Kenya's leader: "[Daniel arap] Moi's government . . . is widely viewed as an engine of domination instead of the agent of the popular will, more interested in

maintaining old forms of influence and patronage for a minority than in expanding opportunity for the majority. This, I believe, is the root of our current troubles." Wangari Maathai, the legendary leader of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, states: "Leadership in Africa has been . . . concerned with the opportunity to control the state and all its resources. Such leadership sees the power, prestige and comfortable lifestyles that the national resources can support. It is the sort of leadership that has built armies and security networks to protect itself against its own citizens."

In countries such as these, the army and secret service are part of the political machine. They silence their opposition and prevent any broad-based power sharing. When I lived in Rwanda, one of my employees told me that his elderly mother had tried to vote against the continuation of the Habyarimana regime and been prevented from doing so. When she then stated that an old woman with mud on her feet from the fields ought to be allowed to vote against the official who drives his Mercedes Benz to the polling booth, she was arrested.

Though it is hard to prove, it is widely accepted that some African leaders promote ethnic violence during election times or when their power is challenged. The powerful are willing to injure and kill people so that they can continue to feed unhindered on the country's resources. Mobutu Sese Seko, the former president of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), so ferociously plundered his country's resources that at his death his estimated worth stood at between \$5 billion and \$10 billion. His country's national debt was \$14 billion.

Even some of the church leaders in such countries become involved in power games and ethnic divisiveness instead of serving as champions of justice. They, too, may have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. We only need to consider our own history of race relations to understand how this can happen. Sometimes the flow of international charitable aid into the church attracts self-interested people into the institution; not all church leaders are oriented to serving the people. Many courageous men and women of the church have fought for justice, but many others have manipulated the system for their own gain.

Do we need to do something to help deeply indebted countries? Absolutely. Is the industrialized world partly responsible for their plight? Absolutely. Do we want to encourage corrupt leaders by giving them money that will enable them to pretend to be benevolent lovers of the people? Absolutely not. If we are going to forgive debt,

let us not fool ourselves into thinking that we can outsmart the cunning men and women who are experienced at manipulating the international community for their own benefit. These leaders who are so good at sleight of hand will empty our pockets while they throw a few crumbs to the poor, and then laugh as their own bank accounts grow.

If a country is governed by a small, corrupt power elite and the national debt is really the debt of that elite, then let them face their people without foreign aid. The international community placed strong economic sanctions on the former white South African government. Even though those sanctions also impacted the poor, no one called for their discontinuation. Everyone agreed that ending the evil of apartheid required stern measures. Why can't we see that apartheid-like policies also exist in other countries? The world has shut its eyes to the racist policies of Rwanda and Burundi. Instead of imposing sanctions, we want to forgive their debts. When Kenya's leaders stir the country's racial tensions into riots, we look the other way and then talk about forgiving the government's debts.

Some will accuse me of paternalism and of ignoring our own guilt. But anyone who has lived among the people of countries with corrupt regimes has seen what happens when money comes in from the outside. The Jubilee 2000 campaigners claim to be aware of dictatorial and international power cliques. They state, "Jubilee 2000 calls for co-responsibility of debtors and creditors for the debt crisis. Remission of debt should be worked out through a fair and transparent process ensuring full participation of debtors in negotiations on debt relief." But can there be such a thing as "transparent processes" in countries where spies and guns counter any threat to the status quo? Why does it take a coup d'etat to change most African governments?

We will only increase our guilt if we inhibit necessary, fundamental changes from occurring in these countries. We recognized this in dealing with the former Rhodesia and South Africa. But not with Rwanda. We seem to be blind to black-on-black racism and corruption. Only fundamental change would have prevented the genocide in Rwanda. Only fundamental change will stop the incessant coups d'etat in nations where one group after another seeks to grow fat on the country's resources.

A groundswell of opposition to corrupt leaders is rising in several African nations. The West must not provide the leaders of such nations with the means to mollify

their populations temporarily while they solidify their positions of power. Where the church is in bed with the government, it should also be considered suspect. At the same time, the church in the West must educate itself about our history of foreign political manipulation focused on protecting our own self-interests. This understanding should be a prerequisite to joining campaigns like that of Jubilee 2000.

Forgiving debts is a worthwhile enterprise, consistent with biblical teachings. But the admonition to fight for the oppressed must equally be kept in mind. Forgiving a national debt and freeing the oppressed are not necessarily the same thing. In fact, they may be opposites. Let us proceed cautiously. We should not help any poor country that has a large, internally focused military or secret service. We must deal with more than the superficial issue of debt relief. The West must acknowledge its role in creating and supporting corrupt dictatorships. The economic powers need to help poor countries ruled by benevolent governments to get a sure footing in the international economic system.

Ultimately, we must realize that we in the West can not "fix" the problems of the poor countries. The people themselves must rise up and say no to their corrupt power elites. They must say no to the petty corruption that occurs at every police station and customs office. They must say no to benefiting from the ill-gotten funds of family members with access to power. They must say no to preying on ethnic groups who are outside of the power clique. They must say no to corrupt spiritual leaders. Until this is done, debt relief will provide only a temporary respite, a time when leaders can rest more peacefully in their expensive villas. It will only camouflage the slow, under-the-surface boil in countries ruled by corrupt dictators and their minions.

The church must not look to economic cures while ignoring systemic disease. We must not swing the odds against our brothers and sisters who are fighting for change. They understand the need for changed hearts. To paraphrase Bakole Wa llunga's book *The Paths of Liberation: A Third World Spirituality*: The path of liberation is long and winding, but it always must go through the heart of humanity.