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Countless trials ahead as world population reaches 7B

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She's a 40-year-old mother of eight, with a ninth child due soon. The family homestead in a Burundi village is too small to provide enough food. Three of the children have quit school for lack of money to pay required fees.

"I regret to have made all those children," says Godelive Ndageramiwe. "If I were to start over, I would only make two or three."

At Ahmed Kasadha's prosperous farm in eastern Uganda, it's a different story.

"My father had 25 children -- I have only 14 so far, and expect to produce more in the future," says Kasadha, who has two wives. He considers a large family a sign of success and a guarantee of support in his old age.

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

THE ASIAN GIANTS

Already the second most populous country, with 1.2 billion people, India is expected to overtake China around 2030 when its population soars to an estimated 1.6 billion.

But even as the numbers increase, the pace of the growth has slowed. Demographers say India's fertility rate -- now 2.6 children per woman -- should fall to 2.1 by 2025 and to 1.8 by 2035.

For now, China remains the most populous nation, with 1.34 billion people.

Nonetheless, its growth has slowed dramatically and the population is projected to start shrinking in 2027.

EUROPE AND THE U.S.

Spain and Italy, both forced to enact painful austerity measures in a bid to narrow budget deficits, are battling

By the time Ndageramiwe's ninth child arrives, and any further members of the Kasadha clan, the world's population will have passed a momentous milestone. As of Oct. 31, according to the U.N. Population Fund, there will be 7 billion people sharing Earth's land and resources.

In Western Europe, Japan and Russia, it will be an ironic milestone amid worries about low birthrates and aging populations. In China and India, the two most populous nations, it's an occasion to reassess policies that already have slowed once-rapid growth.

But in Burundi, Uganda and the rest of sub-Saharan Africa, the demographic news is mostly sobering as the region staggers under the double burden of the world's highest birthrates and deepest poverty. The regional population of nearly 900 million

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jobs and affordable housing are discouraging some couples from having any children at all.

In 2010, for the fourth consecutive year, more Italians died than were born, according to the national statistics agency.

Unlike many countries in Europe, France's population is growing slightly but steadily every year. It has one of the highest birth rates in the European Union with around two children per woman.

Like France, the United States has one of the highest population growth rates among industrialized nations. Its fertility rate is just below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman, but its population has been increasing by almost 1 percent annually due to immigration. With 312 million people, the U.S. is the third most populous country after China and India.

AFRICA

Lagos, Nigeria, is expected to overtake Cairo soon as Africa's largest city.

Such is daily life in Nigeria's commercial capital, where the population is estimated at 15 million and growing at 6 percent or more each year.

The rest of Nigeria isn't growing as fast, but it's already Africa's most populous country with more than 160 million people.

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could reach 2 billion in 40 years at current rates, accounting for about half of the projected global population growth over that span.

"Most of that growth will be in Africa's cities, and in those cities it will almost all be in slums where living conditions are horrible," said John Bongaarts of the Population Council, a New York-based research organization.

Is catastrophe inevitable? Not necessarily. But experts say most of Africa -- and other high-growth developing nations, such as Afghanistan and Pakistan -- will be hard-pressed to furnish enough food, water and jobs for their people, especially without major family-planning initiatives.

"Extreme poverty and large families tend to reinforce each other," says Lester Brown, the environmental analyst who heads the Earth Policy Institute in Washington. "The challenge is to intervene in that cycle and accelerate the shift to smaller families."

Without such intervention, Brown says, food and water shortages could fuel political destabilization in developing regions.

"There's quite a bit of land that could produce food if we had the water to go with it," he said.

The **International Water Management Institute** shares these concerns, predicting that by 2025 about 1.8 billion people will live in places suffering from severe water scarcity.

"Overall, this is not a cause for alarm -- the world has absorbed big gains since 1950," said Bongaarts, a vice president of the Population Council. But he cautioned that strains are intensifying: rising energy and food prices, environmental stresses, more than 900 million people undernourished.

The executive director of the U.N. Population Fund, former Nigerian health minister Babatunde Osotimehin, describes the 7 billion milestone as a call to action -- especially in the realm of enabling adolescent girls to stay in school and empowering women to control the number of children they have.

"It's an opportunity to bring the issues of population, women's rights and family planning back to center stage," he said in an interview. "There are 215 million women worldwide who need family planning and don't get it. If we can change that, and these women can take charge of their lives, we'll have a better world."