

WORLD & NATION

Debt relief concern draws activists

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Street protesters confronting police gained world headlines as the spring World Bank and International Monetary Fund meetings opened in Washington.

Voices of religious protest and advocacy for debt relief earlier in the week got fewer headlines — but came with a longer and larger track record of success.

The street protests April 15-17 led to hundreds of arrests, as Washington police turned out in force to prevent a repetition of the violence some protesters had engaged in during similar demonstrations against the World Trade Organization conference late last year in Seattle. As in Seattle, the protesters' goal was to disrupt the international meetings.

Police were also present in force, but made no arrests, at earlier demonstrations and actions in Washington April 9-11. Those activities, also directed at IMF-World Bank issues, were sponsored by groups in which members of religious organizations play a major role.

The key actions April 9-11 were:

- A rally and human chain April 9 by Jubilee 2000/USA, the U.S. branch of the international Jubilee 2000 movement for debt relief for the world's poorest nations.

- Lobbying of Congress for debt relief April 10 by hundreds of the previous day's rally participants and representatives of five Catholic dioceses in the area.

- A five-hour Economic Way of the Cross and protest in Washington streets by the Religious Working Group on the World Bank and IMF.

The Religious Working Group, a 10-year-old coalition of about 50 religious organizations, has conducted its annual Economic Way of the Cross since 1996 as a way of focusing prayerfully on economic injustices, especially the costs in human life and suffering from the crushing debts of the world's poorest nations.

About 100 people joined this year's five-hour prayer-and-protest action, which ended with a presentation of the group's new statement on debt relief to an assistant to World Bank President James Wolfensohn.

The statement, "A Moral Assessment of Progress Toward Jubilee," acknowledged that over the past year the World Bank and IMF have adopted significant new policy statements aimed at increasing debt relief for the world's poorest countries and requiring that the proceeds from such relief be used to alleviate poverty and meet basic human needs.

But it said a history of IMF-World Bank policies harming the poor leaves "enormous skepticism" about how those new policies will be carried out.

The Religious Working Group, which has had numerous meetings with IMF and World Bank officials including several extended sessions with their top leaders, has seen those institutions do a major policy turnabout over the past two or three years — especially last fall — on many of the key issues that concern them.

Among speakers at the Jubilee 2000 rally on the Mall April 9 was Catholic Archbishop Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, who told some 5,000 demonstrators, "We are going to win the battle against debt."

Following an afternoon of speeches and entertainment on the Mall, the demonstrators marched to the Capitol and encircled it, arms linked in a human chain symbolizing the chains of debt holding the world's poorest countries in economic slavery.

Labor unions brought busloads of members from as far away as Delaware and West Virginia for the rally. AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney, a rally speaker, urged global worker solidarity and argued that the heavy debt of poor countries, by driving down the wages of their workers,



Mike Mergen/Photo intern

About 10,000 protesters attempted to disrupt the meetings of the World Bank and IMF in Washington, D.C., April 15-17.

hurts workers everywhere.

Groups of women religious, some of them from distant parts of the country, were also in wide evidence. When asked about their presence, many spoke of their order's corporate commitment to debt relief and spoke of the experience of their own members working in some of the world's poorest countries.

"Injustices in the world economic order are causing untold misery in places where we are working," said Sister Maria Hornung, one of 30 Medical Mission Sisters at the rally. Order members with her included two nuns from India and one each from Venezuela and the Philippines.

Several hundred of the rally participants stayed on in Washington April 10 to lobby on Capitol Hill. Their most immediate goal was to gain congressional support for U.S. contributions to the World Bank's HIPC (Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) Trust Fund.

The fund, to which all other major creditor countries have already contributed, would restore to regional development banks the funds they would lose by canceling or reducing debts owed to them by poor countries eligible for debt relief.

About 250 lobbyists from the Jubilee 2000 rally met early April 10 at the (Lutheran) Church of the Reformation, two blocks from the Capitol, for an advance briefing on points to address when

meeting with their representatives.

Just down the street, at St. Peter's (Catholic) Church, another briefing was taking place at the same time for about 75 Catholic social justice advocates from five dioceses who had changed their annual lobby day in Washington to April 10 in order to coincide with the Jubilee 2000 lobbying. The dioceses represented encompass the District of Columbia and the states of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia.

Many of the Catholic lobbyists had also been at the Jubilee 2000 rally the day before.



One group uses a trash dumpster to break through police barricades. The effort was unsuccessful.

For their lobbying plans, debt relief was one of the major issues. But they were also there to urge legislators to back a higher minimum wage, food stamp changes, less restrictive Cuban embargo rules and a bill to improve pain management for terminally ill patients.

Contributing to this story was Nancy Hartnagel.

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