

KUALA LUMPUR: Asia now accounts for more than 400 million illiterate men and women, or three-quarters of the world's population of 948 million illiterates.

The number of illiterates in Asia and the Pacific region increased from 638 million in 1970 to almost 700 million in 1990, according to all assessment made by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

This is despite the fact that literacy rate for the region grew from 45.5 per cent in 1970 to 65.2 per cent in 1990. It is expected to reach 71.1 per cent by the end of the century.

A UNESCO analysis classifies two groups of illiterates. An illiterate is a person 15 years or older who cannot read and write a short simple statement about everyday life.

The first group lives in rural areas where literacy is reckoned to be at least 20 percentage points lower than those for urban areas.

The second group is composed of women. Statistics show that of every 10 illit-

erates in the region, six are women.

The rate for women determines quite decisively the overall literacy level. For instance, it has a positive influence on family life, children's education, health and nutrition.

To solve the adult illiteracy problem in the region, UNESCO launched the Asia-Pacific Programme for Education for All (APEAL) in 1987. Aside from eradication of illiteracy, APEAL also aims at a universal primary education and provision of continuing education programmes.

In Asia and the Pacific region, only Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the republics of the former Soviet Union have achieved universal literacy.

In recent years, Singapore and South Korea joined the list, largely composed of

Asia tops UNESCO's illiteracy survey

have less than 50 million illiterates in the world.

Population growth, qual-

ity of life, health and envi-

ronmental problems have

been identified as some of

the urgent issues that re-

quire attention in Asia and

the Pacific to realize the

goal of basic education for

80 per cent of the region's

children by the year 2000.

"How effectively educa-

tion leaders and the educa-

tion community as a whole

respond to these major

challenges will have a direct

effect on the quality of life

and future development of

the region," a UNESCO re-

port says.

The UNESCO report titled education for Development: Responding to New Challenges, notes that 3,400

million or almost two-

thirds of the world's total

population live in Asia and

the Pacific region.

The region's annual

growth rate is 1.7, although

growth rates differ from

country to country. The

participate in community

and cultural pursuits.

countries with the largest

populations.

"Continued population

growth presents major

problems for economic

growth and for tackling

problems such as poverty

and the need to improve

health services and the ade-

quate provision of food,"

says the report.

Due to the surging popu-

lation in the region, pri-

mary school-aged popula-

tion generally of 6 to 11

years old is expected to in-

crease from 409 million to

481 millions by the year

2000.

Although the quality of

life differs among societies,

the report says, some basic

elements are generally ac-

cepted. These include a rea-

sonable life expectancy, ad-

equate food and nutrition,

basic housing and clothing,

adequate income, and

meaningful employment.

"Poverty is often associ-

ated with low education

standards and lack of rele-

vant employment skills," it

says.

But despite the impres-

sive economic development,

poverty remains a major

problem in the region.

The report says,

"Poverty is often associ-

ated with low education

standards and lack of rele-

vant employment skills," it

says.

Furthermore, diseases

continue to take its toll in

the region. The dreaded Ac-

quired Immune Deficiency

Syndrome (AIDS) has already reached pandemic proportions and observed within parts of the Asia-Pacific region.

The Geneva-based World Health Organization (WHO) says that more Asians than Africans will be newly infected by the mid-1990s.

"In the absence of a vaccine, education for the prevention of behaviours that lead to infection with HIV/AIDS is essential," the UNESCO report stresses.

According to the report, Asia and the Pacific face such environmental problems as deforestation, air and water pollution, floods and landslides, reduction of biological diversity and particular problems associated with urban life in large cities.

"Environmental education for sustainable development is a high measure in promoting and integrating the philosophy, goals and objectives, concepts and strategies for sustainable development into the teaching-learning process for all types of levels and education," the report said.

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