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Today, Sept. 8, is World Literacy Day

# Asia Suffers Cutback In Education Expansion

George Javier

**M**ANILA—Despite steadily falling illiteracy rates in much of the Third World, the number of people unable to read and write has risen to nearly one billion from an estimated 889 million in 1985.

The reason for this disturbing trend is not hard to find. Population explosion in most developing countries and a downturn in the global economy continue to hamper efforts to promote primary and adult education.

"Education programme have not been able to keep up with the population", explains the UN Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the lead agency in the efforts to provide education for all by the year 2000. What's more, education programmes in many countries have encountered crippling problems due to the economic downturn in the early part of the 1980s.

In poor countries where basic needs are inadequate, education gets a very low priority. This is to be expected since the bulk of available resources in channeled into the daily struggle for survival.

As a result, says UNESCO, "the

means of improving the quality of life through education remain beyond the reach of many countries."

Poor countries simply do not have the means to support literacy campaigns and to help the newly literate to practise and retain their skills, says John Ryan, UNESCO's associate coordinator for International Literacy Year (1990).

## Primary Education

Most severely affected by less public spending on education is primary education. In 1985, about 100 million children were out of school in the developing world.

As of 1985, 889 million people aged 15 and above were illiterates (UNESCO defines illiterates as those who cannot with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life"). Most (97.9 per cent) were in developing countries.

Because of its large population base, Asia is bearing the brunt of the reversal in education expansion in the last 20 years. It accounted for the greatest number of illiterates—666

million or 75 per cent of the world total in 1985.

Africa was in second with 162 million (18 per cent) followed by Latin America and the Caribbean with 44 million (5 per cent). The rest were in the industrialised countries.

Five of the nine countries with illiterates exceeding 10 million are in Asia. These are India (264 million), China (229 million), Pakistan (39 million), Bangladesh (37 million) and Indonesia (26 million).

Without exception, illiterate women far outnumber men in all regions of the world. This gap is more pronounced in the least developed countries.

To redress the problem, the UN General Assembly has declared 1990 International Literacy Year. For its part, UNESCO will launch action programmes to boost primary and adult education and help member states cut illiteracy by the year 2000.

A number of international agencies, including the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the World Bank, are working on a second plan. This calls for a major forum on "Education for All" to be held in

Bangkok March 5-9, 1990. The objectives are to coordinate the global campaign against illiteracy and promote primary and adult education.

There are other constraints on the campaign to provide education for all. Lack of political will is as crippling as lack of funding. Too often literacy campaigns are only given lip service by governments which are also less enthusiastic about prospect of a more articulate population demanding fuller political participation and better government services, UNESCO laments.

But on the whole, rapid population growth is still the toughest obstacle to an effective literacy campaign. "If we cannot do anything with population we have now," argues UNESCO's Mr. Ryan, "the prospects of finding the resources and the will to do something with a vastly larger population in the 21st century are not very hopeful."

He warns that the problem of illiteracy will become even more overwhelming unless these difficulties are resolved.

—Depthnews