

The World at 7 Billion, and Growing



Reuters

Commuters at the Churchgate train station in Mumbai, India, on Monday, October 31

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This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

The United Nations estimates that the world reached seven billion people on Monday. No one can be sure. The United States Census Bureau does not expect that to happen until March.

Populations are growing faster than economies in many poor countries in Africa and some in Asia. At the same time, low fertility rates in Japan and many European nations have raised concerns about labor shortages.

Population experts at the United Nations estimated that the world reached six billion in October nineteen ninety-nine. They predict nine billion by twenty-fifty and ten billion by the end of the century.

China's population of one and a third billion is currently the world's largest. India is second at 1.2 billion. But India is expected to pass China and reach one and a half billion people around twenty twenty-five. India will also have one of the world's youngest populations.

Economists say this is a chance for a so-called demographic dividend. India could gain from the skills of young people in a growing economy at a time when other countries have aging populations. But economists say current rates of growth, although high, may not create enough jobs.

Also, the public education system is failing to meet demand and schooling is often of poor quality. Another concern is health care. Nearly half of India's children under the age of five are malnourished. Sarah Crowe at the United Nations Children's Fund in New Delhi says these two problems "could keep India back."

SARAH CROWE: "That child is unable to really grow to its ability and will remain in a state of stunting and not be able to learn when it goes to school -- when he or she goes to school, and indeed later earn and really pay back and pay into the economic and help the country and the region move forward. We have, you know, out of every two hundred million children who start school, only ten percent complete grade twelve."

Michal Rutkowski is the director of human development in South Asia at the World Bank. He says the seven billionth person was likely to be a girl born in rural Uttar Pradesh. Uttar Pradesh is one of India's poorest and most crowded states, with nearly two hundred million people.

He says reaching seven billion people in the world is a good time for a call to action.

MICHAL RUTKOWSKI: "I think the bottom line of the story is that the public policy needs to become really, really serious about gender equality and about access to services -- to combat malnutrition, and to provide for access to health services, water, sanitation, schooling."

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report. I'm Jim Tedder.

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