

WorldWatch

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Disasters

Major catastrophes, including widespread flooding and the mass killing of members of a doomsday cult, claimed 17,000 lives in 2000 and caused losses totaling \$38 billion, reports Swiss Reinsurance Company, a firm that monitors world disasters. The biggest single loss of life came from flooding in India and Bangladesh in August, when 1,200 people died. Incidents of flooding were responsible for four of the top five disasters in 2000. According to the report, "The number of fatalities from man-made disasters—almost 9,000—was significantly above the average for the past decade."

Power

With about a third of the state's power plants out of service and little power to buy or beg from neighboring states, California is teetering on the brink of widespread blackouts. Facing shortages this time of year, when power demand is far lighter than during the heavy air-conditioning loads of summer, is unprecedented and especially unsettling. California's red-hot economy, fueled by high-tech industries, is pushing up demand for electricity at 4-5 percent a year in some areas, but little has been done to keep up with demand. Californians, known for their environmental activism, have resisted building new power plants—and none have been installed during the past decade. In addition several big power plants have used up their annual allotment of pollution credits and cannot restart without facing stiff fines.

Circumcision

A Queensland, Australia, psychology professor told the Sixth International Symposium on Genital Integrity that the surgical removal of the foreskin, performed on 12% of Australian infant boys today, could result in a range of psychological and sexual problems in adulthood, including post-traumatic stress disorder. Professor Greg Boyle of Bond University says, "To amputate a highly erogenous sexual tissue such as the foreskin is quite clearly a criminal sexual assault." He asserts that circumcision is a violation of a child's human rights and should be considered an offence to be prosecuted through the courts. Female genital mutilation is illegal in Australia under laws introduced in 1995.

European Union

» The leaders of the 15 EU member states announced on December 11 that they had agreed to revamp the EU's decision-making procedures. At the Nice summit, Germany backed down on its demands and accepted a new system that assigns an equal number of votes to the four largest states (Germany, France, Britain and Italy). The summit also approved, however, a provision that takes closer account of population. In matters decided by majority vote, member states can invoke a new rule stipulating that a decision is valid only if the members voting in favor together represent at least 62% of the EU's total population. The range of such issues was expanded, though not to the extent that many had hoped. Several politically sensitive areas—notably taxation,

immigration and cultural policy—will continue to require unanimity. The EU will now be ready to accept new members by January 1, 2003, and that the first new members should be admitted by mid-2004.

» An editorial in the Munich, Germany, *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* on December 7, 2000, provides this insight: "It is revealing what Germany and France are especially at odds over at the moment. It is not the number of representatives in the [European] Parliament or the make-up of the [European] Commission. No, it is a question of power in the [European] Council. Schroeder is playing for more votes for Germany, Chirac is holding to equal weighting. With their dispute, Berlin and Paris are showing who is supposed to have the final word in the Europe of the future: the European Council (made up of the heads of state and government) and the specialized ministerial councils. . . . [In the EU] the spirit of community is waning. . . . The union is in danger of descending to shifting alliances of state groups. Europe has been wrecked by this once before."

Weapons

One in four youths has used a gun or knife or has been in a situation where someone was injured by a weapon in the past year, according to a large American study of adolescents. The survey finds that teenagers who are failing school and "hanging out" unsupervised with friends are at the highest risk of a number of dangerous behaviors. It also contends that behavior such as smoking, drinking, pre-marital sex and acts of violence cannot necessarily be correlated to youngsters' racial and economic backgrounds.