

Census: World population growth slowing

WASHINGTON (AP) — The world's population growth is slowing because women are having fewer children and more people are dying from AIDS, especially in Africa, according to a Census Bureau report released Monday. The report forecasts there will be nearly 9.1 billion people by 2050, a nearly 50% increase from the 6.2 billion in 2002. However, the growth rate is slowing significantly.

The global population grew 1.2% from 2001 to 2002, or about 74 million people, but growth will slow to 0.42% by 2050. That's far below the peak growth of 2.2% between 1963 and 1964.

The projections are generally in line with separate forecasts from the United Nations and private researchers. The 2050 world projection is slightly lower than the 9.3 billion forecast in a previous bureau report on the topic in 1998.

Bureau officials warned that such forecasts are based on two factors that could change: fertility rates in developing countries and the AIDS epidemic.

Generally, in the United States and Europe, women are having fewer children, while fertility rates remain high in India, parts of Africa and some other developing countries, said Carl Haub, a demographer with the Population Reference Bureau, a private research group.

The wild card is how prevalent contraceptive use and family planning becomes in these countries, Haub said. As an example, he cited India, where the population is expected to rise more than 50% to 1.6 billion in 2050, surpassing China as the most populous country.

According to the bureau, there are at least 100 million women in the world's developing countries who would like to space or limit their pregnancies but are not using contraception.

Family planning education in India and Africa is difficult because of the large numbers of

rural villages that cannot easily be reached, Haub said.

In 2002, the world's women gave birth to an average of 2.6 children over their lifetime. The bureau projections assume that the fertility rate will drop below two children per woman by 2050.

Meanwhile, AIDS has killed more than 20 million people since the epidemic began two decades ago. Twice that many people now live with HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS, and barring major medical breakthroughs most of these people are expected to die within the next 10 years, the bureau said.

AIDS continues to have its greatest impact in developing countries of Asia, Latin America and especially sub-Saharan Africa. Botswana and South Africa are among countries that may see population decline because of AIDS deaths.

"AIDS alone is devastating the heart of these countries, affecting people in the prime years of not only their economic production, but the prime years of reproduction," said Steve Mosher, president of the Population Research Institute, a Front Royal, Va.-based group that opposes population controls as a way to curb growth.

"Population control efforts make no sense in the face of the AIDS epidemic," Mosher said.

Still, the bureau report said the trend could reverse if AIDS education programs are expanded successfully in developing nations, and pointed to positive signs in Thailand, Senegal and Uganda, nations in which the AIDS epidemic appears to have been stemmed.

The report also predicted the continued increase in the world's older population. In 2002, people 65 and older made up 7% of the population, but that age group will comprise nearly 17% by 2050.