**Syria On The Brink**

One sentence scrawled last March on a wall by 15 teenage students helped spark an uprising in Syria that has been escalating in recent months despite government efforts to crush it.

What did the sentence say? “The people want the **regime** to fall.”

Decades Of Repression

The students wrote the sentence to express their frustration with the harsh **dictatorship** of President Bashar al-Assad, who has ruled Syria for the past 11 years.

Since Mr. Assad’s political party, the Ba’ath Party, took power in 1963, opposition parties have been banned and Syrians have been forced to live under emergency law. Their personal freedoms, such as the right to travel and to meet with others, have been restricted. As well, the government has been able to arrest anyone without cause, a measure that it uses to keep **dissidents** in check. Torture is widespread, and many accuse the government of **corruption**.

On top of all of this, Syrians have endured decades of high unemployment, widespread poverty and rising food prices. Life, for many, is hard and unfair – and there is no one to turn to for help.

The Protest Spreads

The small act of protest by a group of teens, however, angered the government. It ordered the army to quickly round up the graffiti artists and throw them in jail. Officials hoped that this harsh response would discourage other Syrians from expressing their own unhappiness. But it had the opposite effect; instead of retreating in fear, residents in the students’ home town took to the streets in anger. Then when police fired into the crowd to break up the demonstrations, protests – and violence – mushroomed across the country. Over several weeks, hundreds were killed when snipers and tanks fired on unarmed protesters. Men were rounded up in night-time raids and electricity and communication lines to several towns were cut.

“The shooting is hammering down on us like rain,” one protester said.

Reaction To The Violence

Clashes continued for over a month. Then in May, the United States and the European Union (EU) responded to the bloodshed by imposing **sanctions** on Syria. Other countries spoke out against the violence.

“Stop the killing machine . . . before it’s too late,” urged King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

In response, Mr. Assad claimed he had no choice but to carry out the attacks. He said his forces were just protecting Syrians from the “armed gangs” and “terrorist groups” who were causing the unrest.

“The role of the government is to fight those militants in order to restore stability and to protect civilians,” the President stated.

Increasing Pressure

By mid-November, more than 3,500 people had been killed and many more injured. As well, there were reports that thousands of protesters had been detained by the government. As a result of these developments – and the length of the crisis – the world began to increase pressure on Mr. Assad’s government.

On November 12, the **Arab League** suspended Syria’s membership. Several weeks later, it imposed its own sanctions against the country, including freezing assets and investments in Syria, banning senior government officials from traveling outside the country and ceasing dealings with Syria’s central bank.

Then, on November 22, the **United Nations** Human Rights Committee passed a resolution condemning Syria’s crackdown on protesters. The measure carries no legal weight but was meant to pressure China and Russia, who in October **vetoed** a **Security Council** resolution against Syria, to reconsider their positions.

Meanwhile, Syrian fighters began organizing themselves into a united group called the Free Syrian Army. At the same time, the rebels formed a political wing, the Syrian National Council (SNC), to officially challenge President Assad and bring democracy to Syria.

Canada’s Position

For its part, Canada has also imposed sanctionson the Middle Eastern nation in recent months. But because Syria is not one of our major trading partners, our actions will have little impact on the country. So, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird said he is looking at other ways Canada can isolate the Syrian government.  
“The regime has lost all legitimacy by killing Syrian men, women and children to stay in power. This campaign of terror must stop,” he said.

**About Syria**

With a 4,500-year history, Syria is one of the oldest nations in the world. The country borders Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. One part of Syria, an area known as the Golan Heights, has been controlled by Israel since a war in 1967.

At 185,180 square kilometres – more than twice the size of New Brunswick – Syria is made up of fertile plains, mountains and deserts. Its capital is Damascus and Arabic is the official language.

Most of Syria’s 22.5 million citizens are Muslims who belong to either the Arab Sunni sect (74 percent) or the Alawite Shia sect (16 percent). Ten percent of the population is Christian. President Assad and the small group who run the mainly **secular** government are Alawite Shia.

For years, Syria has been a closed and walled-off nation. The government severely restricts access to foreign journalists, making reports difficult to verify.

**The ‘Arab Spring’ Of 2011**

Syria isn’t the only country in the region experiencing upheaval. A series of popular uprisings has been sweeping North Africa and parts of the Middle East since the start of the so-called Arab Spring of 2011.

The turmoil began in Tunisia in December, 2010 after a 26-year-old university graduate set himself on fire because he couldn’t find work to support his family. His suicide sparked a revolution that brought down the government. Inspired, the people of Egypt and Libya soon mounted successful revolutions of their own. There have also been major protests in Bahrain, Yemen, Algeria, Jordan, Morocco and Oman.  
Why the discontent? Many countries in the region are not democratically run. Corrupt dictators or monarchs lead governments accused of using torture and other tyrannical means to keep their people in check. As well, 100 million generally well-educated people between the ages of 15 and 29 in the area make up 30 percent of the population. Yet despite their skills, there are few jobs. In fact, the jobless rate for young Arabs is 25 percent, compared to a world average of 14 percent. The result? Many people are frustrated and lack hope for the future. They want change.

**Arab League:** an international organization of independent Arab states formed in 1945 to promote cultural, economic, military, political and social cooperation. Syria was a founding member.

**corruption:** use of a position of trust for dishonest gain

**dictatorship:** a government in which one person holds absolute power

**dissidents:** people who actively oppose official policy

**regime:** a system of government

**sanctions:** penalties, such as restricting trade, for violating international law

**secular:** not religious; not connected with religion

**security council:** the peacekeeping branch of the United Nations, composed of five permanent members and ten elected members

**United Nations:** international body that most countries belong to, formed to promote peace, cooperation and security

**vetoed:** used the special power it had to block a vote

**On The Lines   
Answer the following in complete sentences:**

1. What is the population of Syria?

2. Describe the religious makeup of Syria.

3. List at least four other important facts about this country.

4. Identify the leader of this country and the party in power.

5. Describe how the Syrian government has ruled the country.

6. In what other ways have the Syrian people suffered?

7. Describe how the regime reacted to anti-government protests that spread across the country last Spring.

8. How did the world community respond in November to events in Syria?

**Between The Lines**   
An ***inference*** is a conclusion drawn from evidence. *A plausible inference is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.*

What inferences can you draw from the fact that the Syrian government severely restricts access to foreign journalists?

**Just Talk About It**   
1. Consider the following quote: “***For the welfare of your own people and the region, just leave that seat. If you want to see someone who has fought until death against his own people, just look at Nazi Germany, just look at Hitler, at Mussolini, at Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania. If you cannot draw any lessons from these, then look at the Libyan leader who was killed just 32 days ago.***” - Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a televised speech in mid-November

a) What is your understanding of this quote?

b) Respond to this quote. Do you agree or disagree with the speaker’s advice? Why or why not?

c) What advice would *you* give to Mr. al-Assad concerning the uprising in his country? Explain.

2. “***Only the Syrian people are concerned with this matter.***" - A spokesperson for the Syrian embassy in Washington, responding to international pressure on his country during November.

a) What is your understanding of this quote?

b) For what reasons do you agree with the speaker's perspective? For what reasons do you disagree?

c) As you see it, how should the world respond to the uprising in Syria? Give reasons to support your response.

**On-Line**   
Visit our student website at **www.news4youth.com** to:

1. Read more about Syria (or visit **https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html**).

2. View photos of Syria (or visit **http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Middle\_East/Syria/**).

**7 Billion – And Counting**

You probably remember October 31, 2011. That was Halloween! But it was a special day for another reason, too. On that date, somewhere in the world, a baby was born. And according to a recent **United Nations** (UN) report, *The* *State of the World Population 2011*, that infant’s arrival brought the world’s population to seven billion.

Seven billion people on our one small planet! It wasn’t always this crowded on Earth. And depending on your perspective, it has either taken humanity a long time to reach this landmark – or practically no time at all.

Population Explosion

About 2,000 years ago, there were only about 300 million of us. After 1,600 years, that figure doubled to around 600 million. Humans crossed the one-billion threshold in 1804. By the mid-20th century, the population had grown to about three billion – and then the numbers really took off.

Between 1950 and 2000, the world’s population doubled to an estimated six billion. In just the past 12 years, we’ve added another billion people. Now, the world population is growing by more than 200,000 every day. If this rate continues, there could be 10 billion people on Earth by the end of this century.

Reasons For Our Growth

What’s behind our population explosion? The UN report says that a jump in average **life expectancy** – from 48 years in the 1950s to about 68 now – is one reason. Another is a drop in the number of children who die in infancy or from diseases at a young age. And all of these positive developments are due in large part to advances in health care, such as new drugs (especially antibiotics) and immunizations.

A Good News/Bad News Story

In many ways, then, the rapid growth of world population since 1950 is good news – more people are healthier, and living longer. But there are downsides to our exploding growth, too. One of the biggest? The number of people inhabiting our planet is stressing the Earth’s resources. Simply put, we’re using more of just about everything than nature can replenish. Along the way, we’re harming the environment. And the rapid growth in our numbers has led to serious inequalities in access to food, water, housing, and work. Some people have a lot; many people have too little.

What’s The Real Problem Here?

But is our exploding population entirely to blame for these problems? Or is it overconsumption – the way that we distribute and use the resources that we have? UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon thinks it’s the latter.

“Our world is one of terrible contradictions,” he commented on the Day of Seven Billion.“Plenty of food, but one billion people go hungry. Lavish lifestyles for a few, but poverty for too many others.”

Renowned environmentalist Dr. David Suzuki is another expert weighing in on the side of overconsumption.

“North Americans, Europeans, Japanese and Australians, who make up 20 percent of the world’s population, are consuming more than 80 percent of the world’s resources,” he says. “We are the environmental predators and despoilers of the planet, and so we blame the problem on overpopulation.”

Climate Change Implications

U.S. research cited in the UN report seems to support Dr. Suzuki’s position. It shows that an individual’s **carbon footprint** varies depending on where he or she lives.

“An extra child born today in the United States would, down the generations, produce an eventual carbon footprint seven times that of an extra child in China, 55 times that of an Indian child or 86 times that of a Nigerian child.”

What’s The Solution?

Dr. Suzuki notes that environmental impacts will only increase as people in **developing countries** try to live more like North Americans. So, he says, we must “reduce waste and consumption, find cleaner energy sources, and support other countries in finding ways to develop that are more sustainable than the ways we’ve employed – to learn from our mistakes.”

Simply slowing the world’s rate of population growth will not address the challenges of future climate change. Dr. Suzuki believes the far bigger contribution will come from reducing consumption and changing technologies.

Cause For Hope

Most experts agree, however, that if we don’t also slow the growth of the world’s population, we face an even more uphill climb in trying to live sustainably on this planet.

And in this regard, there is cause for hope. Families are having fewer children. In 1950, there was an average of six children per family, but today that average has plummeted to 2.5. This slowdown means each family has more resources for food, health care and education. Over the past 200 years, we’ve also seen vast advances in the way we feed, shelter and care for people everywhere. And if we work at it, we can keep improving conditions.  
“We must increase the probability that every child born will be wanted and well cared-for and have decent prospects for a good life,” said biologist Joel Cohen, who wrote a book on world population. “We must conserve more – and more wisely use – the energy, water, land, materials and biological diversity with which we are blessed.”

**Population By Nation**

With just 48 people, the Pitcairn Islands in the South Pacific is the country with the smallest population. Here are the five top countries.

1. China – 1.4 billion

2. India – 1.2 billion (India will surpass China by 2030.)

3. United States – 313 million

4. Indonesia – 246 million

5. Brazil – 203 million

Canada’s Population – 34 Million – Ranks 37th.

**Food Crisis**

In today’s world, there is enough food to go around – yet one out of every seven people in the world goes to bed with an empty stomach.

Many of the hungry live in poorer nations, where rising prices, climate change, economic crises and outdated farming techniques have reduced the supply of nutritious food available.

Another factor affecting the world food supply? Disappearing farmland. There are fewer and fewer areas available for growing crops. Why? Because people who live in poor rural regions around the world have been migrating in droves to cities and towns to look for work. In 1950, about 730 million people lived in cities. By 2009, that figure had reached nearly 3.5 billion. To accommodate this massive population shift, food-producing farmland has been giving way to housing.

The UN says this a huge problem. To properly feed everyone, we’ll have to increase food production by 70 percent over the next 40 years. That will require more farmland, not less.

**Did You Know?**

In the 10 minutes it has taken you to read this story, about 1,400 babies were born.

**On The Lines   
Answer the following in complete sentences:**

1. Explain what the **UN** is.

2. What did this organization predict would happen on October 31?

3. How fast is the Earth’s population growing?

4. List two reasons why population growth has increased since the 1950s.

5. Explain how rapid population growth is stressing the planet.

6. List at least four reasons why the food supply has decreased in many poor countries.

7. By how much must food production increase over the next 40 years to properly feed everyone?

**Between The Lines   
Making an inference:** An ***inference*** is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A plausible inference *is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.*

What inferences can you draw from the fact that China, with 1.4 billion people, is the most populous country in the world?

**Beyond The Lines**   
Canada's population of 34 million ranks 37th in the world. But how are Canadians distributed across the country?

a) Create a bar graph showing the population of each province and territory in 2011 using the information available on the Statistics Canada website at **http://www40.statcan.ca/l01/cst01/demo02a-eng.htm.** (A well-designed bar graph *is neat, accurate and clearly shows the population of each province and territory.*)

b) Then, discuss: What is the population of the province or territory that you live in? How does it compare to the population of other provinces and territories? What might the importance of this information be? What other observations can you make about you graph and what is the importance of these observations?

**Just Talk About It**   
In what ways is our growing world population a good news story? In what ways is it a bad news story?

**On-Line**   
Visit our student website at **www.news4youth.com** and click on the *What in the World?* tab to:

1. Find out where you fit in the global population, and to read stories and view graphs and video about our world of 7 billion (or visit **http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-15391515**).

2. Submit your thoughts to our **forum**:

A world population of 7 billion is both something to celebrate – and cause for concern. Overall, would you say that our growing world population is more of a good news story than bad, or more of a bad news story than good? Give reasons to support your response.

*A good submission is clearly written, logically organized (including an introduction and a conclusion), and supported with plausible reasoning.*

**We’ll post the best submissions!**