



World Chronicle

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“Censuses and Emerging Democracies”

Housing and population censuses yield the basic information all governments need to plan and distribute services to their people.

But what happens in countries like Afghanistan, where war and civil strife have made it impossible to count the population for more than two decades? How important are impartial censuses to emerging democracies? Can the United Nations help to make each person count, and be counted?

These questions are explored with the help of Mary Chamie, Chief of Demographic and Social Statistics Branch in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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ANNOUNCER: From the United Nations in New York, an unedited interview programme on major global issues. This is World Chronicle,

And here is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

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But what happens in countries where war and civil strife have made it impossible to count the population? How important are impartial censuses to emerging democracies? Can the United Nations help to make each person count, and be counted?

Our guest today is Mary Chamie, Chief of Demographic and Social Statistics Branch in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

Joining us in the studio are Louis Hamann of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC and Susannah Price of the BBC.

Ms. Chamie, welcome to **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Chamie, an impressive number of countries – 184 – have conducted censuses in the past ten years or so, but it still leaves a number that have not yet accomplished census taking including many in Africa. What has the UN's role been in this process? And what are the priorities of your branch – your department -- at this time?

CHAMIE: Thank you for that question. In fact, as you mentioned, there is a large part of the world that has been covered - 183 countries in areas of the world are reporting that they have conducted a census in what we call a census decade, which is going from, in this case, from 1995 and will be finished in 2004 -- so we're nine years through a ten year decade. And too, in this process, ten percent of the population of the world has not been counted – we roughly understand that from the UN estimates that 90% of the World's population has been counted in this decade round. But if we look at it by region, we can see that there are enormous differences where nine out of ten, or virtually the large majority of people in Europe and North America have been counted; as many as fifty percent of the population of Africa remains to be counted. So it's a success story within, yet it's unfinished business. There's more to be done and more work. You asked me about the role of the United Nations. The UN has had a role in the production of censuses for a full fifty years.

Censuses have served every established democracy for a good, long time. For example, a lot of the census work in the United Nations started after World War II, when it was the whole of the reconstruction of Europe that was being worked on. And again, the stock taking in the importance of assessing the housing and the numbers of people in the countries was a very important aspect of the UN even in 1950. Again, it showed up as a very important factor in the newly-emerging transition countries in Eastern Europe. And now we're in a situation where we're again looking at these countries, who have newly emerged or have recently come out of political strife, and they're going to need some special attention. In every case, the UN has been involved by setting the standards and the methods in working as a team with statistical offices all over the world, to agree on definitions and terms.

HAMMAN: Quickly, for those of us who are not experts on this matter, could you just explain very simply why censuses are so important? And maybe talk about some of the hurdles that you face in counting everybody; you mentioned for example some African countries, what are some of the hurdles that prevent you from actually reaching these people and counting them?

CHAMIE: Okay, thank you Louis. I'll try to answer that. But the census is one of the largest and certainly one of the most important data collection activities of any government. It's largest because it tackles, and it tries to count the entire population of the country. And in the process it is taking note of every village, every dwelling, every city, all small housing, human settlements are being counted and they're locating them and then counting all the people who live within the described area of the government, and they're doing it in a short period of time. It is important as was mentioned because it establishes the representation of government, it's used for the allocation of expenditures by government, and it's a very important stock taker for national policy planning in health, education, welfare, transport. And it's also used by the international groups for assessing the United Nations goals such as the Millennium Development Goals, for assessing the advancement of women, looking at quality of housing and quality of life. The problems are enormous because you can imagine it requires very different approaches in different countries. Some countries are large, vast territories with groups of people who are partially nomadic, and they have to be located, and there may be a great deal of effort to find them using all kinds of techniques. Other countries are approaching their people

through the internet already. So, the way in which the questions are being asked and how you locate people, making sure you locate them once and only once, and that they're counted during a very short period of time – is a huge challenge, for a statistical office.

HAMMAN: If I can follow on that, how's the fact that more and more citizens of the world now are much more mobile, I mean, you know, you see people travelling a lot more, living in countries that are not necessarily there. Has that changed the dynamics of the business that you are in? I mean, is that change the way that you do your work - and how?

CHAMIE: That's really an important question because that is emerging right now as an issue. You may have seen recently an announcement by the United States that they are seeking to consider ways in which they will count their populations residing out of the country. There are other countries trying to come together to share and trade data and exchange it, so that if I have people who have migrated into their countries, I don't know exactly where they are unless I have an exchange with other countries about the foreign born and the citizenship of their countries, so that I can assess the migration. And yes, that is a very important factor coming up.

PRICE: Could we talk a bit about the relationship between elections and holding of a census? I think about other people would think - is it logical in a country to maybe have the census first? Find out the number of people there, the kind of people they are. But it seems that in Afghanistan and in Iraq, it looks like we're going to have or we're going to try at least, to have the elections first, push through the elections as quickly as possible for various political reasons, and then you're looking to have the census after that. Is that the right way around do you think? Is that a common way to do it?

CHAMIE: Well, censuses and elections are both very important and very different activities. The goal of an election is to identify the citizens of a country, to know them by name, and to be able to have them vote and vote once in each election. The census, by law in most countries, and certainly by rules and statistics are to be anonymous, private information that is provided to the government and never ever re-availed again at the individual level, ever. As a matter of fact, it's a felony in some countries to provide individual information from a census. And there are rules that it cannot even be shared sometimes for 100 years before they will

share a name, being reported in a census. In some countries, they destroy the questionnaire after they put it in electronically and release them from the names. So, it would be two activities going on, which should come first? This is the problem of the currently emerging countries. There is no correct answer to this, but certainly they must be separate. The problem usually occurs because elections are urgently needed, so are censuses. But censuses cannot be emerged -- conducted in a quick way. Most governments plan for three to five years, with their ministries, and with their communities, to decide on these questions. Very few countries want to wait three to five years for an election. And even in many of the countries that already are very established and have had censuses for 50 years, if you look back, or have had them for 100 years. The first, came the elections, and then came the census. That doesn't mean they work without population estimates; there are demographers and teams of analysts who can try to estimate these populations needed for representation.

HAMMAN: When you read the literature, the UN literature on censuses, it says that they are usually conducted every five to ten years as you mentioned...

CHAMIE: Yes.

HAMMAN: Participation is state-initiated and they are usually legislated. Now if you don't have a legislature in place as is the case for example in Afghanistan or in Iraq, how do you proceed? How do you go about that? What are the parameters that are set? Who sets those parameters for the conducting of an accurate census?

CHAMIE: That's a tough question because they're writing their constitutions, and they're...in some cases, like say in the case of Iraq, there was legislation. In the case of Afghanistan, I think there was, during the 1979. But here they are, writing their constitutions, and setting up their legal patterns, and in...that's one of the reasons why we would encourage people to spend the extra time and go the extra mile to get the legislation down, set up the protection necessary for confidentiality of information - for transparency of the questions. There are very clear rules that if I'm asked questions, the government is to provide me back with the information in group terms, so that I can understand how big is this country? How many people reside here? How many people live in my village?: the group answers. So, this whole agreement must be reached really before a census is taken, and

censuses that are done without it could be jeopardized because trust is a very important issue.

PRICE: In terms of the questions, I'm quite interested in how they're chosen. For example, I read that with Lebanon the question of religion was left out because it was too sensitive. And in terms of Afghanistan, we're thinking the ethnic question, I mean, that can be a very, very controversial key question to find out who is...I mean we know the Pashtuns are the largest group. Are they the majority? What percentage? What percentage are the minority groups? Is that something that you are aware of when you're drawing up the questions? When the information comes, you say there's a definite necessity to put that information into the public arena, but of course it can be possibly dangerous, I guess?

CHAMIE: That's right. We monitor worldwide the questions being put out on censuses, on ethnicity, race, religion, and language. There are no agreed standards for asking about ethnicity for clear reasons across the countries. Each has their own understanding of what it is. But why they do it? You're right, there's a problem of why would a country want to do this? In many cases there are issues that governments wish to monitor. One is equal rights, access to schools, opportunities to vote, levels of participation in the community. And in order to assess whether things are being fairly distributed or services are fairly received, they need to know the attributes of people that might be used for discrimination. And so it's a Catch 22. You need to ask the question, but you don't want the individual jeopardized for having provided this information and privacy, confidentiality, and separation of the individual's identity from the understanding of ethnicity is important. That's one issue. The second one is that in a country like Afghanistan – Pashtuns for example, if you ask their language, you'll get one group and if you ask their ethnicity, you'll get a different answer. It's a social construct. And so, they do need time to test it out and get community agreement, on how it's going to be asked, and for what purpose.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Mary Chamie, Chief of Demographic and Social Statistics Branch at the UN. We're talking about population censuses, and one of the places where people have not been counted for more than two decades is Afghanistan, as we just heard. Here's our report.

VIDEO ROLL IN (UNIA # 862) TRT: 3'18"

NARRATION: Nobody knows for sure how many people there are in Afghanistan. Most censuses of countries occur every ten years. But, it has been more

than 23 years since Afghanistan counted its population and catalogued their living conditions.

More than two decades of war made nationwide censuses impossible. In addition, millions of people were uprooted. Estimates of the population vary widely from 14 to 25 million.

Recently, a mission from the United Nations Statistics Division, based in New York, arrived in Afghanistan to help the country's Central Statistical Office organize a population and housing census scheduled for 2005. The 2001 Bonn Agreement that put the country on the path to peace, specifically stated that the United Nations should conduct a census in Afghanistan, as soon as feasible.

In Chaharekar, a village located northwest of the capital city, Kabul, the first stages for the forthcoming census are already underway.

As part of its plan, the Afghan government has begun preparing a master list. This contains all cities, villages, communities, dwellings and households in the country. For the first time since 1979, women field enumerators are being used. Theirs is a crucial contribution towards rebuilding this long-suffering nation. Rahila Arif, a former math teacher, is one of 61 women working for Afghanistan's Central Statistical Office:

ARIF (VO): "I feel that this activity that we are undertaking is being looked at positively by the population. We are going to do our best to count how many men, women, and children there are so that we can provide our statistic office with accurate information."

NARRATION: A census provides vital information to government policy makers, researchers, academics, and private investors on the social and economic status of the entire population. Information from censuses is used to plan housing, roads, schools, hospitals and many other services. It is vitally important that people participate – for people count, says Mary Chamie, Chief of the UN's Demographic and Social Statistics Branch, who led the mission to Afghanistan:

CHAMIE: "Right now in Afghanistan, there are villages that are formed that are not even on the maps and the census is identifying these villages, putting them back on maps. It is very important that people be counted so that they are represented, and so that they can be planned for by the government and by non-government organizations as well."

NARRATION: The government is preparing to count its people under very difficult circumstances. Afghanistan is a vast territory with poor communications. Security risks remain high. Landmines and unexploded ordnance continue to present a grave danger. The 2005 census will be a major step forward, taking stock of Afghanistan's most important resource for the future: its people.

VIDEO OUT

LITTLEJOHNS: Mary Chamie, difficult as it is, the process in Afghanistan seems to be well under way, but Africa is another case. Nigeria, Somalia, Congo, major countries of Africa have not had censuses in ten years or more. Is this a case of Africa falling off the map of international concern? And what is the UN doing to redress that situation?

CHAMIE: It's a very serious question and a serious problem. We're assessing right now, reporting worldwide on something as basic as population size, by whether the numbers of women and the numbers of men, by age groups and so forth. And a good number of African countries -- it's been two decades, three decades, without information -- and here we are in an area that has many serious issues in front of it, even in terms of assessing its mortality, let alone its fertility and its population compositions. We've recently been working with the Congo, we've been in consultations with countries in Africa where their statistical offices have been destroyed. All of their previous work is gone, and they're contacting us for books, for basic instructions on demographic methods, because all their materials have been lost in looting and fires and other ways. It's not simply a problem of forgetting them. Even if the United Nations is seriously engaged in working with them, there are problems of security. It's a big responsibility to send huge numbers of people to the field to collect information in villages that may not...they may not even know for sure that they exist anymore. In the case of Congo, maybe they have some understanding of where the villages were in the 80's -- but where are they today? The villages may be gone, others may have cropped up, people have moved across borders, there have been droughts - people have shifted to other areas. So, there has to be a whole process of finding out where the villages are, and they don't necessarily have addresses, they don't have street names. So, it can be a very large task for a small team of a....

LITTLEJOHNS: Of course there's the problem of nomads, which was mentioned before by Louis I think.

CHAMIE: Yes. And there can even be a problem of facilities - having computers, having paper, having pencil, having a trained group be ready to do this. And sometimes these... not only in Africa, but if I can offer an example, I was looking at the census on China. They had an estimated 6 million people involved in the enumeration of that country. And in some of the countries in Africa that are remaining, they need 22,000 to 25,000 enumerators just to be there for the count. That's a lot of organizing to get a group like that together and to get them to know the rules and be able to go to the villages and handle this.

PRICE: I wanted to pick up on that question of security because it's also a key issue. And you can't carry out a census if you can't get people out and about in the country, and it seemed to me maybe even in the film we've just seen on Afghanistan was a little bit optimistic on that front, I mean countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq as well, still very unstable, a lot of weapons, a lot of no-go areas. I mean, how difficult is it for you to assess the security? When it is safe to go in? What kind of security do you need? Do you have guarantees from the government for example? And ultimately, how optimistic are you - Afghanistan and Congo ahead?

CHAMIE: Alright, I'd like to remind you that the group who is really doing the census in Afghanistan are Afghans. And one of the things that we in the UN must be concerned about is if we are supporting them and encouraging them, we do need to be in a direct dialogue about the degree of security required before they can go in to certain areas. It is important to understand whether even the results are going to have any validity if you're in a situation where people are really pinned to the ground because of fighting. This is an aspect of the work, and security is a requirement for a major operation like a census. Large parts of the country have to be secure before it can be done. I would agree with that.

HAMMAN: Speaking of 234 countries and areas, which report to the UN so-called Demographic Yearbook. And Michael was mentioning at the beginning of the show that some 180 of these areas and countries are, now we all know that there are 191 countries in the UN, so where did these other areas? Where are they?

What are they? I mean because I thought that censuses were only taken in countries per se, so when you talk about areas, what are you talking about?

CHAMIE: There are number of areas , around the world, that are considered occupied territories, or they have special descriptions and they're not necessarily countries. But if you're going come up with a full understanding of the total count in the world, they must be counted. And so they're included, they can be small islands, it can be a number of different types of areas. But one has to be quite specialized in territories to go through the entire list; it's quite large. And in the Demographic Yearbook, it's fun to take a look and see all the different areas that are there.

HAMMAN: About the frequency of census, we're talking about 5 to 10 years, every 5 to 10 years. Is there a specific reason for that? Because given the changes that happen so quickly whether it be droughts you know, different things that caused people to move maybe crossing border and what not, shouldn't censuses be taken maybe at a greater frequency? In other words maybe every 2 to 3 years, or every 4 to 5 years, as opposed to every 5 to 10 years?

CHAMIE: It's a desirable thought but terribly expensive and enormously difficult to do. And you'd be mighty surprised to find out how every 10 years taking a full assessment of a country, how much you get -- information about what has happened to their mortality, their fertility, their immigration, their quality, and to be able to plan to consider estimating the future from it. It's very powerful if you look at us at the table, and you added up the number of years we've lived, it's quite long. People last a long time, so if you pick them up in their 50's and you find them again in the 60's and they disappeared in the 70's, we know it -- demographers are following that flow.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the cost factor? Is it a very expensive function?

CHAMIE: It's a very time consuming and expensive process.

LITTLEJOHNS: The UN provides funds for it?

CHAMIE: The UN does provide support for it. The large proportion of the funds comes from the government itself. Technical advisory support on specific issues like planning samples that come up of it, UN provides funds for, offers technical...

LITTLEJOHNS: And the UN supervises the enumerators?

CHAMIE: The UN is called in sometimes and various times to offer support, advice and sometimes to observe. Very much like they do the elections, they also observe censuses and document how well they're doing, and they also meet with countries sometimes before they're going to present the statistics and do a team evaluation of the results.

LITTLEJOHNS: Susannah we have less than a minute left.

PRICE: Okay, I was a...just one thing you've just received the 1997 Iraq census. Any surprises? Any information that you would particularly could be helpful in the count crisis?

CHAMIE: I think it's important to notice that they have a census, and its 5 or 6 years since it was taken. It does have a story to tell. We have encouraged the Iraqi Statistical Office to review that census and since for long periods of time in Iraq, census data were not publicly available, we've encouraged them to prepare an analysis and present it to the public. It's a good practise, it will gain trust for the next census round.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Chamie that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been the Chief of the Demographic and Social Statistics Branch in the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Mary Chamie. She was interviewed by Louis Hamman of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/CBC and Susannah Price of the BBC.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

ANNOUNCER: Electronic transcripts of this programme may be obtained free of charge by contacting **World Chronicle**, at the address on your screen.

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