

\$260m Allocated to Underprivileged Groups

Majlis approved allocation of \$260 million from the Foreign Exchange Reserve Fund to disadvantaged social groups, deputy head of the State Welfare Organization

for parliamentary affairs and logistics said. Ali Asghar Karandish told ISNA that the budget would be allocated to the needy people under the auspices of the SWO and the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee. "The grant will be supplied to the target community during the second half of the current year (started March 20)," he noted. Karandish asserted

that the executive bylaw on how the budget should be divided between the State Welfare Organization and Imam Khomeini Relief Committee would be worked out in collaboration with the Management and Planning Organization. "This budget will be distributed among female-headed households, the disabled, disadvantaged groups and those without financial support," he added.

1.8m Receive AIDS Education

A total of 1.8 million young people, relief workers and volunteer forces of Iranian Red Crescent Society have been educated on ways and means of preventing AIDS, head of IRCS said. Addressing a seminar held on the occasion of the Global AIDS Day on Dec. 1, Ahmad Ali Nourbala asserted that the society was one of the oldest and largest non-governmental organizations in the country and that it played a crucial role in raising public awareness on how to ward off deadly diseases, especially AIDS. "IRCS endeavors to rein in the spread of HIV/AIDS have already proved efficient. Experience gained by other countries shows that AIDS can be controlled by educating the people through mass media," he added.



Nourbala noted that close to 20 million people had already succumbed to the disease and that the figure was predicted to double by 2010. Meanwhile, deputy health minister cited latest figures based on which 6.8 percent of AIDS patients had been infected through sexual contacts, 57.5 percent by sharing drug needles and 2.7 percent through contaminated blood products--the rest have unknown causes. Mohammad Esmail Akbari unveiled plans to supply free condoms and

needles to high-risk groups within the framework of national campaign against AIDS. Akbari put the number of identified AIDS patients in the country at 7,510, of whom 95 percent were men. "All patients are provided with free of charge medical services which cost a monthly six million rials per person," he noted.

Crime Rate Down



Presently the number of incoming inmates is 500,000 per year.

Prisoners incarcerated on criminal charges have decreased by 40,000 over the past two years, deputy head of the State Prisons Organization for cultural affairs said. Mohammad Ali Zanjirei told IRNA that the number of these inmates had declined from 176,000 in 2002 to 136,000 at the present.

"The reduction in the number of people put behind bars on criminal charges is partially because the SPO has invested more in cultural and educational issues," he added. The official noted that presently the number of incoming inmates is 500,000 annually, whereas about 450,000 are released each year. Commenting on the role of cultural programs in discouraging crime, Zanjirei noted that the number of inmates returning to prisons after release had dropped to 27 percent from 45 percent previously. "About 50 percent of crimes are drug-related, while robbery and financial offenses account for 20 percent," he added. The official expressed hope that the imprisonment period for many charges would decline once the substitute penalty bill is endorsed. "The proposal will also help improve the per capita space in prisons which is presently eight square meters. The figure was only 2.3 sq.m. earlier. The organization insists to raise the space for every inmate to 17.5 sq.m., but the Management and Planning Organization has only agreed with expanding the share to 10 sq.m."

Nat'l IDs For All By 2008

National ID cards will be issued for all the people aged 15 and above by March 2008, head of Iran's Civil Registration Organization said. Ayatollahi told ISNA that those who have not yet received their national IDs would have to apply and obtain their cards by March 2008.

Noting that close to 14.5 million people had already received their IDs, Ayatollahi pointed out that the capacity for issuance of the IDs was primarily targeted at 1.8 cards during a one-year period which increased to 3.5 million cards later. "We achieved the highest record by issuing some seven million IDs last year (ended March 19). It is predicted that the capacity would reach 15 million a year," he added.

Study Planned on Non-Contagious Diseases

Deputy minister of health said the plan entitled 'Controlling Dangers of Non-Communicable Diseases' would be launched as of December 21 and would last for a period of one month.

Mohammad Esmail Akbari explained to IRNA that some 87,500 people aged between 15 and 64, selected randomly, would take part in the project. "Participants would fill out questionnaires and take diabetes and cholesterol tests," he said, adding they would be visited by physicians free of charge. Meanwhile, deputy head of the Disease Management Center for Non-

Communicable Diseases said the questionnaires are intended to obtain information pertaining to the subjects' dietary practices, smoking, diabetes, blood pressure and physical activities. Alireza Delavari added as per a contract concluded by the ministries of post and health, the test results would be mailed to the participants. Delavari further stated that the budget set aside for the scheme was 2.5 billion rials which would be shared out among the provinces. The scheme is aimed at studying dangers of non-communicable diseases in further detail.

Sir Thomas Browne (English author and physician, 1605-82):

There are mystically in our faces certain characters which carry in them the motto of our souls, wherin he that cannot read A, B, C may read our natures.



An old woman in an old people's home in Tehran (Photo by Mohammad Kheir-Khah)

China has set the lofty goal of providing safe drinking water to every rural family by 2020, but has yet to work out how it will do so, state media reported.

Officials said they were ready to launch a long-term project to deal with the lack of clean water, which is threatening the health of millions in the Chinese countryside. Zhai Haohui, vice-minister of water resources, was cited by China Daily as saying that by 2010 the plan was to cut down the number of residents without access to clean drinking water by one third. "By the end of 2020, we are going to reach the goal of basically providing safe drinking water for all rural people," he said. The deadline is part of the government's millennium goals declared to the United Nations. "This problem must be tackled as more than 300 million rural residents throughout China still lack clean drinking water," said Zhai. "In some areas, many farmers have to go several kilometers away to fetch drinking water, while some have to drink water with high fluoride or arsenic content or salty water that endangers their health." Unsafe drinking water is connected to 80 percent of all diseases and deaths in developing countries, ministry experts say. In China, more than 50 diseases are the direct result of unclean drinking water. How China manages to achieve its goal remains to be seen. According to earlier state media reports, China's water supply is

Safe Water for China's Rural Residents

under greater pressure than ever, and the situation would go on deteriorating until 2030, when the population peaks at 1.6 billion. The problem is that China is much more wasteful in its use of water than most other countries, even though it has far fewer resources than the world average, according to the reports. Zhai admitted that the government had yet to work out details of the plan, but said he was confident a blueprint would be possible to meet the target. Over the past five years, more than 14 million rural families throughout 27 provinces have gained access to drinking water with more than 800,000 new water processing facilities going into operation, the China Daily said.



More than 50 diseases in China are the direct result of unclean drinking water.

Family "Fundamental" to Development

An international conference on problems and challenges faced by the family in the third millennium wrapped up in Doha on Thursday as religious representatives strongly defended the traditional family unit. "The family is not only the fundamental group unit of society but is also the fundamental agent for sustainable social, economic and cultural development," said the so-called Doha Declaration published after the two-day meeting. "We reaffirm international commitments to the family and call upon all governments, inter-

national organizations and members of civil society at all levels to take action to protect the family," it added. "This conference helped to build a line in defense of the traditional marriage," Rabbi Daniel Lapin, member of the US Commission for the Preservation of America's Heritage Abroad, told AFP. "The struggle today is between traditional family and the radical materialism," he said, slamming homosexual "marriage." "What is necessary is the conservative family," said Muslim cleric Youssef Qaradawi on the

sidelines of the event, which gathered government officials, academics, faith-based groups, non-governmental organizations and civil society members. "Family norms are the same for the three monotheistic religions," Qaradawi told AFP. "Relations outside legitimate marriages are rejected by religion as well as morally," said Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Patriarch Shenuda III, in reference to both homosexual marriage, and other unconventional relations. Qatar's first lady, Sheikha Mussa bint

Nasser al-Misnad, cautioned against "violations which try to redefine the concept of family in a manner contrary to religious precepts." The declaration also called for developing programs "to stimulate and encourage dialogue among countries, religions, cultures and civilizations on questions related to family life, including measures to preserve and defend the institution of marriage". Participants also reaffirmed "the importance of faith and religious and ethical beliefs in maintaining family stability and social progress."

Australia's Disabled Must Work

Australian conservative government unveiled proposals to force people receiving disability pensions to look for work in a bid to cut the country's welfare Bill, www.abc.net.au reported. Workforce Participation Minister Peter Dutton said a recent pilot program that used a combination of coercion and incentives to encourage Australians receiving disability payments into the workforce had been a success. "The majority of people there is a willingness to participate, to look for work," Dutton said. "For those people we think aren't there legitimately then we've got to try and adopt some coercion and that's unfortunate in the minority of cases," he said. "We are determined to say to people who are on a disability support pension (DSP), 'please

go out and look for a job now-you will be surprised by the benefits that brings to you and we think that's an overwhelmingly successful story for those people who are able to find a job," Dutton said. Officials said the government was spending between 7.5 billion and 8.0 billion dollars a year in disability pensions to about 700,000 people and hoped to save up to \$1 billion with the back-to-work initiative. In the pilot program, 36 percent of the 671 disabled pensioners involved either found work or entered education and training programs, Dutton said. "The pilot found that many people on DSP are willing and able to work with appropriate support and encouragement," he said. "This is in line with the government's view that people should be encouraged to work to their

full potential to receive the financial and social benefits and community inclusion employment gives." The government plan was assailed by the New South Wales state Physical Disability Council as a heartless bid by the newly reelected government of Prime Minister John Howard to cut its welfare bill. "It's just fanciful nonsense to suggest that you can force people with a disability into a working environment that still remains for many of them hostile," the council's executive officer, Dougie Herd, told ABC. "Whilst we welcome any initiative that the Government wants to take to support and encourage people into work, that's quite different from taking a big stick to beat people to go places that don't want them in the first place," he said.