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## Too many babies?

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The food crisis revives worries about population growth

AMID panic over soaring rice prices and worries about whether the Philippines, the world's biggest rice importer, can secure enough supplies, the results of the latest census have diverted blame towards a perennial culprit: overpopulation. The figures put the population at almost 89m when the census was taken last August, up from 77m in 2000. That means it has been growing at just over 2% annually since then. That rate is below the 2.3% annual growth of the 1990s and the 3% of the 1960s. But it is still faster than expected. Some analysts think the census undercounted, especially among poorer Filipinos. The population may now be up to 93m.

Every hour, then, the country has an extra 200 little mouths to feed. And increasing numbers of them are being born into grinding poverty. Other new government figures show that the number of people scraping by on less than \$1 a day has risen by 16% since 2003, to 28m. More people mean more houses, which means less land to grow crops. The government this month imposed a temporary ban on building on farmland, as it revives its attempt to achieve self-sufficiency in rice.

Some senior officials are pressing President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to agree to a big expansion of state-provided contraception and other family-planning help. But Mrs Arroyo is a devout Catholic and wary of upsetting the influential bishops. She relies on their grudging support to resist pressure for her resignation or ouster, following a plethora of corruption scandals.

For years poor Filipinas relied on contraceptives supplied by USAID, America's aid agency. However, its programme has been wound down and the government has put only modest provision in its place. Despite a ban and the risk of up to six years in jail, 500,000 Filipinas have abortions each year.

The debate over whether population growth is the prime cause of poverty and underdevelopment has raged in the Philippines for years. The Catholic bishops do have a point, that corruption and misgovernment are in fact mostly to blame. The Philippines has more than enough land and other natural resources to support its population if it were not so incompetently run. But fast population growth only makes things worse. And figures from the United Nations Population Fund show that making contraceptives more widely available does seem to bring population growth down (see chart). Timor-Leste, another poor and Catholic Asian country, is an extreme case: hardly any contraceptives and an astonishing baby boom.

<http://www.asiaobserver.com/images/fbfiles/images/chart.gif>

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