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ONE) – BRICS OFFER HELP TO EURO ZONE WITH STRINGS ATTACHED

Major emerging nations yesterday said they may lend money to the International Monetary Fund or other global financial bodies to increase their firepower for fighting financial crises, but they could ask for more voting powers in the IMF. **The** commitment by the so-called BRICS nations -- Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa -- fell short of expectations for more direct support to debt-crippled European countries.

Finance ministers of the group, meeting on the sidelines of an IMF gathering in Washington, called on the G20 nations to act swiftly and decisively to ease the euro-zone debt crisis, the same way they fought the global financial crisis in 2008. The G20 group, which includes both emerging and developed economies, is the right forum for those discussions and should be strengthened, the ministers said. Their call underscores a growing concern of major emerging economies about the escalating economic crisis in the developed world. It also highlights a dramatic change of fortune between the two groups of nations, with developing countries offering financial help that could be used to ease the economic crisis of traditional powers.

Failure to act now could turn the euro zone's debt problems into another global financial crisis that would engulf emerging economies, Brazil's Finance Minister Guido Mantega warned. "There is a risk that the sovereign debt crisis of some countries becomes another financial crisis," Mantega told reporters in a joint news conference with other BRICS finance ministers and central bank chiefs. "We eased the 2008 crisis by fast and coordinated actions within the G20. We need to do the same now."

Direct support ruled out

It is not clear how the BRICS could provide funds to multilateral institutions nor how much money they plan to lend. Earlier this month, sources in the Brazilian government said Mantega would propose the group make billions of dollars available to the IMF.

In a statement issued after the meeting, the ministers said financial support would depend on individual country circumstances. "There is (an) enormous amount of demand for resources at home for poverty reduction, so there is going to be a big, big tension between giving money to a multilateral institution for the purpose of restoring global stability and meeting our own aspirations at home," said India's central bank governor Duvvuri Subbarao.

Direct financial support to troubled European countries, another idea floated by Brazilian officials in the past few days, was not discussed in the meeting, South Africa's Finance Minister Pravin Gordhan reportedly said. That type of support, according to the Brazilian sources, could come through the purchase of bonds jointly issued by euro-zone members, the so-called eurobonds.

But Russia shot down the idea. "It's impossible, I am absolutely convinced about that," Russia's Deputy Finance Minister Sergei Storchak told reporters. "Our state procedures do not allow for that. We don't have a mechanism (for that), not in Russia, not in China, not in India. We all have different ways of making decisions, we cannot syndicate our money."

Increase voting power

Any financial contribution to the IMF would probably come with conditions. The BRICS would most likely take the opportunity to increase their voting power in the institution. The next review of member countries' quotas is scheduled for January, 2014. "We are concerned with the slow pace of quota and governance reforms in the IMF," the countries said in the same statement where they offered to help the fund. "This is needed to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of the fund."

About 80% of IMF credit outstanding for all members has been allocated to European Countries. Among programmes currently active, Greece, Ireland and Portugal account for two-thirds of the total non-precautionary IMF commitments – and this does not reflect the expected IMF contribution to the second Greek bailout. A change in voting power could have a decisive impact on the distribution of funds allocated to groups of countries.

The BRICS group also called on developed countries to adopt "responsible" policies that avoid creating excessive global liquidity -- a growing complaint from countries such as Brazil, which has suffered from excessive dollar inflows since the United States started its aggressive monetary easing.

In exchange, the BRICS promised to do what is necessary to secure economic growth, maintain financial stability and contain inflation.

TWO) - SARKOZY FLIES TO MOROCCO TO SELL TGV TO CASH-STRAPPED MOROCCO

Nicolas Sarkozy se rend jeudi au Maroc pour donner le coup d'envoi des grands travaux du futur train à grande vitesse marocain et y apporter, en pleine effervescence des "printemps arabes", son soutien aux réformes politiques engagées par le roi Mohammed VI. Le chef de l'Etat l'avait promis en 2007 en dévoilant le projet. Quatre ans après sa première visite au Maroc, il y revient donc pour poser la première traverse des 350 km de la ligne qui doit relier le port de Tanger à Casablanca, via sa capitale Rabat. L'essentiel de cette visite à grande vitesse (à peine quatre heures) sera consacrée au TGV "made in France", dont les succès à l'étranger sont rares. Après une cérémonie d'inauguration en gare de Tanger à la mi-journée, Nicolas Sarkozy s'entretiendra puis déjeunera avec Mohammed VI, avant de faire une déclaration à la presse puis de rentrer à Paris. Symbole pour Paris de "l'excellence" des relations économiques entre la France et le Maroc, le TGV marocain, qui circulera à 320 km/h, doit entrer en service en 2015 et faire passer la durée du trajet entre Tanger et Casablanca de 5 heures 45 mn actuellement à seulement 2 heures 10 mn. Les autorités marocaines ont prévu un investissement total de 33 milliards de dirhams (3 milliards d'euros) financé en partie par la France qui a débloqué un prêt de 920 millions d'euros. Le reste sera largement couvert par des pays "amis" comme l'Arabie saoudite, les Emirats arabes unis ou le Koweït. Dans le cadre de ce contrat, Alstom a vendu 14 rames de son TGV au Maroc, pour un montant de 400 millions d'euros. **WHAT FOR ?** S'il a réjoui son constructeur français, qui n'a jusque-là vendu sa technologie à grande vitesse qu'en Espagne, en Corée du Sud et plus récemment en Italie, ce premier TGV des pays arabes ne fait pas l'unanimité au Maroc. "Je suis très sceptique quant à ce projet de TGV, qui a été approuvé et octroyé dans un manque de transparence total", regrette l'homme d'affaires casablancais Karim Tazi, "il n'est pas du tout prouvé que le Maroc ait besoin d'un tel projet". "Ce TGV est un scandale dans les conditions actuelles du Maroc", s'indigne en écho l'économiste Fouad Abdelmouni. Outre ce volet économique, Nicolas Sarkozy entend consacrer une partie de son séjour marocain à renouveler son soutien à Mohammed VI dans le contexte des "printemps arabes". Le roi du Maroc a fait adopter par référendum en juillet des amendements constitutionnels. Cette réforme est critiquée par le Mouvement de contestation du 20 février qui continue à exiger des changements plus profonds. "La France salue avec beaucoup de chaleur et d'admiration la volonté de réforme du roi", souligne-t-on dans l'entourage présidentiel, "le fait que le Mouvement du 20 février puisse continuer à manifester sans répression témoigne de la vigueur de la démocratie marocaine". (AFP)

THREE) - SARKOZY APPLAUDS ALLEGED 'REFORMS' BY MOROCCO

Nicolas Sarkozy a donné jeudi au Maroc le coup d'envoi des grands travaux du premier train à grande vitesse du continent africain avec le roi Mohammed VI, auquel il a renouvelé le soutien politique de la France en pleine effervescence des "printemps arabes". Malmené par la défaite historique de son camp aux élections sénatoriales et les "affaires" politico-judiciaires, le président français s'est offert un répit de quelques heures sous le soleil de Tanger, au nord du Maroc, pour y célébrer un succès devenu rare, celui du TGV "made in France" à l'étranger. La facture de ce premier TGV "arabe" est évaluée à 1,8 milliard d'euros, auxquels doivent s'ajouter tous les coûts des infrastructures associées. Un investissement "raisonnable", a précisé le ministre des Transports marocain Karim Rhellab en réponse à ceux qui, dans son pays, jugent ce TGV "high tech" inutile et coûteux. Nicolas Sarkozy a profité de son séjour à Tanger pour renouveler son soutien aux réformes politiques engagées par le souverain chérifien, que Paris juge "aussi significatives" que les révoltes qui ont balayé les régimes voisins de Tunisie, d'Egypte ou de Libye. Mohammed VI a fait adopter par référendum en juillet des amendements constitutionnels. Mais ce changement ne fait pas l'unanimité au Maroc, où le Mouvement de contestation du 20 février continue à exiger des changements plus profonds à quelques semaines d'un scrutin législatif prévu le 25 novembre. "Le Maroc se modernise sous l'impulsion du

roi", s'est réjoui M. Sarkozy à l'issue d'un entretien et d'un déjeuner avec lui. "La France a eu l'occasion à de nombreuses reprises de dire combien elle saluait la vision exprimée par le roi, combien elle se réjouissait du succès exceptionnel du référendum portant réforme de la constitution et de la marche continue du Maroc vers la démocratie", a-t-il ajouté devant la presse. (AFP)

FOUR) - ALGERIA URGES GADDAFI GUESTS TO KEEP OUT OF POLITICS

Algeria's government has ordered members of Muammar Gaddafi's family in exile on its territory to stop making political pronouncements, after Gaddafi's daughter Aisha angered the new Libyan government by telling the media her father was still fighting to hold on to power. "It is clear that the message has been passed on to Aisha and the other members of the family that they should, from now on, respect their status as guests in Algeria and remove themselves completely from any political action," Algerian Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci was quoted as saying by Algeria's official APS news agency. (Reuters) -

FIVE) – RISING SEAS GNAWING AT WEST AFRICA'S COASTLINE

Sea levels on the coasts of Côte d'Ivoire and other West African countries have risen again this year, devastating houses and other infrastructure. The search for effective solutions is lagging behind accelerating coastal erosion. For several years now, the third quarter of each year has brought extraordinarily high sea levels in the Gulf of Guinea.

In the Ivorian economic capital, Abidjan, a number of houses were destroyed and dozens of families made homeless in late August. The challenge is not limited to urban areas: not far from Abidjan, the artisanal fishing community at Grand-Bassam has lost valuable equipment, crippling livelihoods.

The Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott, has experienced [extensive flooding](#) - by some estimates, 80 percent of the city could be waterlogged by 2020.

Thousands of kilometres south and east along the coast, the city of Cotonou, Benin's economic centre, is also battling against erosion. A critical article published in Beninois daily Nouvelle Expression in September asked if the government had given up the fight to save the coastline, documenting the submersion of parts of the Roi de Langouste Hotel, east of the city. A project is under way to construct seven new breakwaters - barriers known as groynes, which extend into the water perpendicular to the shore - in and around Cotonou, as well as the rehabilitation of the existing barrier at Siafato, which will have its length increased from 220 to 260 metres.

Climate change-induced rises in sea levels are part of the problem, but other activities such as unregulated sand mining and the destruction of coastal mangrove forests have also played a role throughout the region.

Managing the coastline

In Côte d'Ivoire, specialists say what is needed is to reopen the mouth of the Comoé River. The Comoé, 813 kilometres long, rises between the cities of Banfora and Bobo-Dioulasso in western Burkina Faso, and flows through Côte d'Ivoire from north to south before reaching the [Ebrié Lagoon](#) not far from Abidjan.

The lagoon, which stretches for more than 100 kilometres along the coastline, is open to the sea only by means of an artificial channel, the Vridi Canal, built in 1950 to allow Abidjan to become a deep-water port. Water from the Comoé has also periodically emptied into the sea a few kilometres to the east, near Grand-Bassam, but this natural outlet is now blocked by silt from the river.

"We have 500 kilometres of coastline being eaten at by the sea, in some places receding by as much as two or three metres per year. And the sea is gaining ground," says Cédric Lombardo, an environmental expert based in Abidjan who worked on this question for the Ivorian government for five decades. Lombardo says the closure of the river's natural mouth by accumulating sediment has had serious consequences. The estuary of the Comoé receives heavy deposits of silt from the river, varying between 60 and 100 centimetres per year. These deposits should reinforce natural barriers protecting the coast from erosion, but the blocked channel prevents this.

The Grand-Bassam channel has been artificially re-opened four times, most recently in 2004, only to fill up again almost immediately.

Lombardo believes that an operation to reopen the river mouth, which will cost an estimated 30 million dollars, will need to create access from the Comoé River to the lagoon, and then into the sea, in order to

allow silt from the river to stabilise the shoreline. In addition to the opening of a new channel for the river, levees will need to be constructed.

He suggests an alternative solution would be the construction of a canal which would also allow the deposit of sediments from the Comoé.

Sustainable solutions

"These are the options," agrees Abidjan-based environmentalist Frédéric Kouamé. "But it remains to be seen if they will work as long-term solutions, and without having negative consequences in the short term. Because generally, the solutions that have been put forward are only temporary."

Kouamé recalls the construction of artificial dunes to protect the coast a decade ago, all of which have since collapsed under pressure from the sea. He added that the effects of climate change, particularly the rise in sea levels, will only aggravate the erosion of West Africa's coast.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has also observed that the responses put forward by governments and others will likely have the effect of only slowing or displacing a process of erosion that is expected to intensify.

The IUCN stressed the need to find more sustainable answers in a presentation to a meeting of environment ministers from across West Africa held in May this year in Dakar, Senegal. At the same meeting, eleven coastal countries, from Mauritania in the west to Benin in the east, agreed on the establishment of a West African coastal observatory to reduce the risks linked to marine erosion.

These governments also acknowledged that the most effective means of stabilising the coastline include the protection and extension of natural infrastructure, such as mangroves, coastal dunes and lagoons.

SIX) – LYBYA REBELS URGE NATO TO INTENSIFY BOMBARDMENT OF SYRTE

Les combattants du nouveau régime libyen ont appelé mercredi l'Otan à intensifier ses frappes pour rompre la résistance acharnée des forces loyales à Mouammar Kadhafi à Bani Walid et à Syrte dont le port a été le théâtre de très violents combats dans la journée. Les combats ont été si violents que les combattants du Conseil national de transition (CNT) ont dû battre en retraite de trois kilomètres à l'est de la ville, a affirmé un commandant à l'AFP sous couvert d'anonymat, en indiquant que trois combattants avaient été victimes de "tirs amis". "Il y a eu des heurts violents aujourd'hui. Nos hommes ont subi de dures attaques. Les combats ont été particulièrement intenses autour du port et à l'est de la ville de Syrte", a-t-il affirmé. Il y a deux jours la prise du port avait signifié une victoire majeure dans la bataille pour le contrôle du bastion du leader déchu par les pro-CNT. Mercredi il était difficile de savoir qui le contrôlait mais le commandant a affirmé que les troupes du CNT y étaient encore présentes. "La situation change d'un jour à l'autre. Un jour nous gagnons, le lendemain ils gagnent", a-t-il indiqué. "Ils ont tout perdu. C'est leur dernière bataille, c'est pourquoi ils se battent féroce. Nos troupes subissent de durs coups.

Aujourd'hui nous avons reculé de trois kilomètres", a-t-il souligné. "Il y a eu un manque de coordination et un groupe de nos combattants a été touché par une roquette lancée par un de nos tanks qui se trouvait derrière eux. Il y a eu trois martyrs", a-t-il par ailleurs indiqué. Auparavant un commandant avait fait état de "plus de dix combattants tués mardi dans des combats rapprochés" près de l'hôtel Mahari dans l'est de la ville. Deux autres morts avaient été signalés mercredi. A Bani Walid, une vaste oasis à 170 km au sud de Tripoli, les forces des nouvelles autorités se préparaient à lancer une nouvelle offensive au lendemain d'accrochages qui ont fait onze morts dans leurs rangs. Parmi les victimes figure Daou al-Salihine Jadaq, qui commandait le front nord de Bani Walid et qui a été tué dans la nuit de mardi à mercredi quand une roquette a touché sa voiture, a déclaré à l'AFP Abdallah Kenchil, un responsable local du CNT. "L'Otan est présente mais n'intervient pas assez. Ils touchent les lance-roquettes depuis lesquels (les pro-Kadhafi) tirent sur nous, mais ils sont aussitôt remplacés. Nous avons besoin de plus d'aide de l'Otan", a indiqué à l'AFP Walid Khaimej, un capitaine pro-CNT, sur le front de Bani Walid. L'Otan a assuré pour sa part ne "pas avoir réduit son activité en Libye", mais a refusé de répondre à l'appel des combattants du nouveau régime. "L'Otan n'a pas pour objectif d'apporter un soutien aux forces du CNT au sol. C'est pourquoi aucune coordination opérationnelle n'est effectuée avec les forces du CNT", a indiqué le colonel Roland Lavoie, porte-parole de l'opération Unified Protector, à l'AFP. (AFP)

SEVEN) –EGYPTIAN DEMOCRATS THREATEN TO BOYCOTT ELECTIONS

La coalition électorale dirigée par le parti des Frères musulmans a menacé mercredi soir de boycotter les législatives de novembre si la loi électorale n'est pas amendée. "Nous refusons de participer aux élections si l'article 5 de la loi électorale (interdisant aux partis de présenter des candidats pour le tiers des sièges du Parlement) n'est pas annulé", a affirmé un communiqué publié au terme d'une réunion des partis membres de "la coalition démocratique" qui comprend une trentaine de formations dont notamment le Parti de la liberté et la justice issu des Frères musulmans et le Parti libéral al-Waf. La loi électorale promulguée par un décret de l'armée mardi prévoit "l'élection des deux tiers des députés des deux chambres selon mode de scrutin de listes fermées à la proportionnelle, et le dernier tiers par scrutin uninominal" réservé aux indépendants. L'article 5 de ce décret stipule que seuls les indépendants pourront se présenter au tiers des sièges qui seront élus selon le mode uninominal et qu'une fois élus les députés indépendants ne pourront pas se joindre au bloc parlementaire d'un quelconque parti sinon ils perdront leurs sièges. "La coalition démocratique" se déclare également "étonnée par la position du Conseil suprême des forces armées (CSFA) qui a refusé la demande des forces politiques d'élire tous les membres du Parlement selon le mode de listes proportionnelles fermées (..) et a choisi un système qui prive les partis politiques de présenter des candidats aux sièges qui seront élus selon le mode uninominal ce qui signifie que la concurrence sur ces sièges sera uniquement entre les indépendants et les candidats de l'ancien régime", selon le communiqué. Ce système électoral mixte fait déjà l'objet d'une vive polémique depuis plusieurs semaines. Le scrutin uninominal est accusé par de nombreux partis politiques de favoriser le retour de personnalités proches de l'ancien pouvoir, qui pourraient se faire élire comme "indépendants" en bénéficiant de leurs réseaux locaux toujours puissants. Les premières élections législatives en Egypte depuis la chute d'Hosni Moubarak commenceront le 28 novembre prochain, marquant le début d'un processus électoral chargé au terme duquel l'armée promet le retour à un pouvoir civil. (AFP)

EIGHT) –EGYPT NAMES NEW ANTIQUITIES CHIEF

Le Premier ministre Essam Charaf a nommé jeudi Moustapha Amine à la tête des Antiquités égyptiennes, vaste empire comprenant les innombrables musées et sites archéologiques du pays des Pharaons, a annoncé l'agence officielle Mena. M. Amine, patron du département d'archéologie islamique au sein du Conseil suprême des Antiquités (CSA), a pris la relève de Mohammed Abdel Fattah, poussé à la démission il y a une semaine par des grèves. Il avait succédé au célèbre Zahi Hawass à la tête du CSA, dont la mission est de protéger et de promouvoir l'immense patrimoine culturel égyptien, notamment ses oeuvres et monuments de l'ère pharaonique. Des grèves ont agité plusieurs secteurs professionnels depuis la révolte qui a renversé le régime du président Hosni Moubarak en février. Les employés exigent que le salaire minimum soit relevé et que leurs conditions de travail soient améliorées. L'armée, au pouvoir depuis la démission de M. Moubarak, a récemment décidé d'élargir le champ de la loi sur l'état d'urgence, pour y inclure notamment les grèves. Zahi Hawass, qui avait rang de secrétaire d'Etat, avait été écarté en juillet dans un climat déjà marqué par des conflits sociaux et des luttes d'influence au sein de ses services. Personnage à la fois médiatique et controversé, M. Hawass s'était rendu célèbre par ses tenues rappelant celles de l'archéologue et aventurier de cinéma Indiana Jones. (AFP)

NINE) – EGYPT PARTIES RETRACT BOYCOTT THREAT AFTER ARMY CONCESSIONS

Egyptian political parties accepted on Sunday concessions on election rules offered by the military, pulling back from threats to boycott Egypt's first multi-candidate vote since President Hosni Mubarak was ousted. The parties, seeking to keep former allies of Mubarak out of parliament, had threatened to boycott the polls unless the army changed an election law to allow them to field candidates both on party lists and for seats allocated to individuals. The ruling army council said on Saturday it would amend that law, set a clearer timetable for a move to civilian rule and would consider ending military trials for civilians and lifting of emergency laws. But political activists and parties said the army's statement had fallen short of meeting their demand of immediately lifting emergency laws and preventing remnants of Mubarak's former ruling party from running. Parties meeting on Sunday said although they have dropped the boycott threat, they would continue to press for the other demands to be met. "We want the state of emergency to end and remnants of the regime to be barred from political life," an alliance of 34 parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal al-Wafd party,

said in a statement. Egypt's parliamentary elections are due to begin on Nov. 28. Mubarak's former allies, many of them local notables who still enjoy clout in their areas, have been spurned by most parties, leaving them with few options to get re-elected to parliament apart from running as independents. "Boycotting the elections was a threatening option to pressure the military council, not a serious one," Essam el-Erian, deputy head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice party, told Reuters earlier on Sunday. "Political parties are established to participate in elections, not to boycott them." The army enjoyed widespread support for maintaining order after Mubarak was toppled in February and for promising to respect demands for democratic change. But Egyptians have grown more vocal in criticising its handling of the transition. Thousands packed central Cairo on Saturday to keep up pressure on the military to sideline Egypt's discredited old elite before the elections, designed to usher in civilian rule. (Reuters)

TEN) –EU BOOSTS ITS BUDGET TO FIGHT IMMIGRATION FROM NORTH AFRICA

The European Union's budget for handling migration was increased by 43.9 million euros (60 million dollars) on Wednesday to handle inflows caused by the "Arab Spring" revolutions in the southern Mediterranean. The European Parliament in Strasbourg, France, approved the step, which will provide the EU border patrol agency FRONTEX with an extra 24 million euros. The rest of the money will go towards EU funds helping national governments patrol borders, welcome refugees and repatriate irregular migrants, the EU assembly said in a statement. The extra money will fund EU countries most directly affected by the inflow of migrants and asylum seekers, as well as financing sea patrolling activities, a statement from the European Parliament said. The money comes from unspent EU funds originally earmarked for energy projects.

ELEVEN) - SOUTH SUDAN'S MOST VULNERABLE

At first sight, the village of Rokwe on the outskirts of Juba looks like any other village in South Sudan. The sun shines bright on the grass roofs of the mud huts and sounds from a church choir practising can be heard in the distance. Only the scenery at the local health centre gives away that this is no ordinary place. Dozens of patients seek shelter from the sun on the concrete veranda. Many have more than one disfigured limb. Some are able to move around, others struggle to walk. Rokwe is a colony for leprosy patients.

Erkolan Onyara was only 13 when he discovered a few sore spots on his legs. He did not know what they were, and when more painful spotting appeared all over his body, he showed his mother. Recognising the symptoms from her own illness, she got very upset. Erkolan – just like her – had leprosy.

Soon, he lost sensation in the affected skin areas and the wounds started to get infected. By the time his illness got worse, his mother had passed away.

Not knowing how they could care for Erkolan, the family heard of a village where people with leprosy were taken care of by a group of church brothers. Erkolan's elder brother brought him to Rokwe in 1976 and the St Martin De Porres Brothers accepted him in the colony.

Erkolan remembers his first months in the village like it was yesterday. "I was all alone and I felt scared. I did not know anyone and I did not know what was happening to my body. It was a difficult time for me." Like many leprosy sufferers, Erkolan was losing sensation in his hands and feet, leading him to often cut himself or injure his feet while walking. When he was 19 years old, disaster struck. "I was cooking dinner and tried to grab a pot that was on the fire. I did not feel the heat and both my hands burnt very badly. I lost my fingers and part of my hands."

Life as a young boy in the colony was a struggle for Erkolan. With the help of some of the Brothers he had built a small tukul (mud hut), but as a boy alone he had trouble feeding himself.

"I could not work because of my disfigurement. I went fishing in the Nile sometimes or tried to grow some crops to eat, but often I was hungry." One of the Sisters from a nearby parish used to visit Erkolan and help him with basics like cooking and laundry.

The small health centre the Brothers ran from within the colony was chronically under-resourced. The ongoing war made the supply of medicine unstable. Still, they were determined to treat the village's patients and cure them of their leprosy. Erkolan was cured in 1986, but the disease had taken its toll on the young man's body: his hands were badly disfigured and he missed several toes, causing him instability when walking.

The medical breakthrough in the battle against leprosy came in 1981, when a World Health Organization Study Group on Chemotherapy of Leprosy prescribed the use of a multidrug therapy (MDT) as the standard treatment for the disease.

Despite being cured of leprosy, most of the patients stayed on in the village. Their often severe disabilities made life in one of the poorest regions in the world even harder for them than for most other people. And in the middle of the brutal civil war, the colony to many felt like the safest place to stay.

Brother Bruno Dada has been working in the colony for the past 23 years. He says fighting did happen around the village over the years, especially since the army built military barracks very close to the colony. However, the stigma against leprosy has in some way protected the 350-strong village from the violent raids many other places in the area endured. Soldiers used to ignore the village because they believed there was nothing there to plunder. They were also afraid to enter the colony as they believed they would catch the disease.

As Brother Bruno puts it: "There is a stigma. People think that they will get leprosy if they shake hands with a patient, whereas in fact, it is impossible to get infected that way. Even if patients' leprosy has been cured years ago, many people are still afraid to go near them."

Despite the preconceptions, many leprosy patients in Rokwe lived in fear throughout the war. Erkolan expresses the anxiety that was felt by many villagers: "We were always afraid because we knew we were vulnerable. If any fighting did break out, we could not defend ourselves."

Erkolan married a woman from the village and they still live in the hut he built when he arrived as a young boy. He is the proud father of three boys and three girls, the oldest of whom is now married and has moved away.

If Erkolan could make one miracle happen, it would be for his oldest daughter to finish her education. "We struggled badly for money and had to take her out of school", he says. "She was a very good student but we just could not provide. We had to send her to get married so that her husband's family could look after her. I still feel bad about that now."

A recent gift from an uncle has improved life slightly for Erdokan's family. He was given an old bicycle, which he uses to go to the forest and collect firewood to sell. "Cycling for me is easier than walking. I can carry the wood on the bike to the roadside. I don't sell a lot but sometimes I get a few (Sudanese) pounds." Whilst most South Sudanese are hopeful about the future of their country, [independent since July](#), Erkolan can't help but be sceptical. "There has been no development here for so long. No government cares for us. I hope things will change but we will have to wait and see."

According to the WHO there has been a dramatic decrease in leprosy cases in the past decades – from 5.2 million cases worldwide in 1985 to 805,000 in 1995 and 213,036 cases at the end of 2008. However, more than 200,000 new cases are still reported each year, mostly in poverty-stricken places like Sudan.

In Rokwe, the lack of government support for the leprosy patients and their families has to some extent been compensated by the work of international aid organisations.

During the war, the World Food Programme and a charity group supplied meals in the colony. Although occasional new cases of leprosy still emerge, the disease is largely under control in the region, thanks to a widespread treatment campaign which cures patients fast and stops spread of the disease.

But for people like Erkolan and others in the leper colony, the treatment came too late. Their illness might be under control, but the damage to their limbs cannot be undone.

The Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund ([SCIAF](#)), with the assistance of Sudanaid, supports some of the poorest sufferers and their families. They provided them with non-food items including 481 mosquito nets, 400 cooking pans, 400 sleeping mats, 400 blankets and 400 jerry cans for fetching water.

SCIAF is currently working on a new project with the Brothers to provide income-generating opportunities for residents and to set up a vocational training centre. They also help improve the housing situation for villagers in most urgent need of a new tukul or repairs to stop leaking in the rainy season.

One of the beneficiaries of the house repair scheme is Laurence Modi, 24. His life story – like that of so many in southern Sudan – is intensely sad. He was brought to the colony in the late 1980s by relatives. Just a toddler, his small body was full of painful wounds that were the starting point of a childhood full of suffering. Both his parents had passed away, and tiny Laurence was dropped in the colony together with his sister, who was barely a teenager. The children moved into an abandoned mud hut and were left to their own devices.

Laurence received treatment from the Brothers to stop his leprosy, but his hands and feet were so badly affected that the simplest tasks like making a fire or digging the ground to cultivate land became impossible. He relied on his sister, who played the role of a mother, despite being only a child herself.

When in 2004 she left the village to get married, Laurence's small world fell apart. "She was all I had," he

says, fighting back tears as he speaks. "I was really sad when she left."

Lonely in his tukul, he started worrying about his future. A neighbour had begun to cook him food every day and help him out with household tasks, but he knew this could not go on forever. The grass roof of his tukul was leaking and at night during the rainy season, he often woke up because of the water dripping down inside. He suffered bouts of depression and saw no way out of his problems.

Early this year, one of the Brothers informed Laurence that he had been put on a list for a new roof. "I thought I was dreaming. I worried so much about the house. I was afraid I would have to go and find shelter at other people's huts. I built this hut with my sister in 2000, we did it all by ourselves. It means a lot to me to live here."

The prospect of an improved house has given Laurence reason to look towards the future again. When the sun sets over Rokwe each night, Laurence sits in front of his hut and takes a moment to himself. He often dreams of the day he will no longer be by himself. "I would love to find a girlfriend and marry and have children. That is natural. My dream is to improve the house and start a family here."

TWELVE) – BURKINA FASO: BONUSES HELP REFORESTATION TAKE ROOT

This year Fatimata Koama and her associates received more than half a million CFA francs as a reward for planting - and looking after - 1,200 trees in their small corner of Burkina Faso. "Trees are important," says Koama. "We plant mostly exotic species, but also mango, moringa, and pawpaw trees."

Koama, who lives in the Nayala province of this semi-arid West African country, is the leader of a collective which calls itself "Magoulé", meaning "I believe" in the local San language.

Magoulé's payout - equivalent to about 1,200 dollars - is just part of more than 100,000 dollars disbursed over the past two years as a strategy to strengthen reforestation efforts, according to environmental group SOS Sahel and the Burkina Ministry of the Environment.

Forest cover threatened

According to a 2010 study by the environment ministry, 110,500 hectares of forest are degraded each year in Burkina Faso, about four percent percent of the total forested area. According to the study, valuable species like the yellow-flowering kapok, palmyra and locust bean tree are seriously threatened by deforestation.

The programme of incentives is designed to help slow this rapid deforestation; agreeing contracts that provide farmers a modest reward for looking after seedlings they plant has improved the survival rates of young trees to around 70 percent, as compared to just 10 percent in conventional reforestation campaigns. "If a (newly-planted) tree survives for 24 months, we reward those who planted it," explains Mouni Conombo, coordinator of SOS Sahel in Nayala. "We don't pay them for all the work that goes into tending the sapling, but we encourage them, helping them understand how it is better to plant a tree and nurture it." The environmental NGO has been working with this strategy since 2001, using donor support to pay a cash bonus to producers who care for seedlings. Their success led the environment ministry to adopt the approach as a national policy.

Stimulating conservation

According to Salifou Ouédraogo, SOS Sahel's executive director, the scheme was a response to the failure of classic reforestation programmes, in which as many as nine out of every ten saplings died. "We did some research, and found this method (of paying a bonus) had been used by the colonialists to introduce cocoa and coffee in Côte d'Ivoire," he said. "At that time, villagers who were forced to plant the new cash crops would use hot water to secretly kill the cocoa and coffee seedlings. But the colonialists gave chiefs an incentive by giving them rewards such as rifles and cloth (for trees that survived). Cocoa and coffee were then accepted," says Ouédraogo.

In its contemporary form, the reward has worked out to about a dollar per tree for the Magoulé group this year, but that doesn't take into account the value of the growing trees.

"It's been three years since I signed a contract," says Boureima Dao, from the commune of Ey, in Nayala. "I have 11 hectares and I have earned a bonus of 206,000 CFA (around 438 dollars) for my orchard of fruit trees, which includes guava, papaya and mango trees."

In Nayala province alone, more than 170 contracts have been signed with local farmers.

Expanding success

"People think that reforestation is very simple, but there are precautions to be taken so that the seedlings we stick in the ground will actually fight desertification," the director of forests at the environment ministry, told Adama Dolkoum. "Among these measures is protection of the saplings - because we are in an area with plenty of livestock. There are also human activities to account for, and there are natural factors which affect the success rate of plantations."

"After the droughts of 1973-1974," says Joachim Ouédraogo, director general for conservation at the environment ministry, "there were industrial reforestation efforts across Burkina with machinery and guards... and that worked well to begin with. But there were problems with this approach and with the ownership of these plantations. The strategy of using contracts makes those who plant trees take responsibility for them,"

The new strategy is not one hundred percent effective. "We give the seedlings to associations and they undertake to fulfill the contracts, but for every ten associations who sign up, only five return for the seedlings the following year, because the others have not respected the terms," said Ouédraogo.

But for those who do, the strategy has transformed attitudes towards planting trees.

"It is different from the traditional programmes of reforestation in which one only provides seedlings," says Conombo, of SOS Sahel in Nayala. "What we are trying to encourage is a real commitment to planting a tree and caring for it as one would care for a child."

THIRTEEN) – SOUTH AFRICA: IN NEED OF A UNIFIED CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY

The implementation of a unified climate change policy across all of South Africa's government departments will not be easy as the divisions currently work largely as separate entities, says Greenpeace Africa. The South African government announced on Sep. 13 that it would beef up its climate policy "to ensure that all government departments responded well to the issue of climate change."

South Africa will host the [17th United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) in Durban from Nov. 28 to Dec. 9, which aims to discuss a legally binding climate deal. South Africa is signatory to the [Kyoto Protocol](#), the world's only international treaty that mandates most industrialised nations to cut greenhouse gases to save the planet from overheating, but is yet to formulate an integrated climate change policy.

South African Minister of [Water and Environmental Affairs](#) Edna Molewa says that it is essential that government departments have a "common" strategy on how to respond to global warming. "It is very important that as we host the Climate Change Conference in Durban, that we as a country start to demonstrate that we are serious about climate change and willing to take the issue forward in terms of policy," she says. However, the government admitted that details of how this will be implemented were still "sketchy".

The country's Minister of [Human Settlements](#) Tokyo Sexwale warned that South African coastal cities were also under threat from rising sea levels. "Given the current rate of gas emissions into the atmosphere," Sexwale said on Monday, "cities such as Cape Town and New York could vanish in the next 100 years." Greenpeace Africa says that currently South Africa's government departments are pursuing their own goals and any shared policy will have to bridge the divide between them.

"It would be great if they could implement the policy across all the South African government departments," says Ferrial Adam, a climate and energy campaigner at Greenpeace Africa. "However, it is not the policy that is difficult... Implementing it is very hard.

"You cannot deal with climate change in a vacuum and that is something that any government needs to do in any respect. It is something that you have to do to make your country work," she says.

Adam adds that a common policy could reduce the costs of fighting climate change in South Africa: "It will get rid of a lot of duplication. But it is that kind of co-operation that we need now, as people are still working in silos. Getting them to work together, despite a shared policy, will be very, very difficult."

She says it is essential that countries have a common policy on climate change across all government departments despite their distinctive focuses.

However, Adam says the South African government needs political will to ensure that policies on climate change are implemented.

"On the one hand (the South African government) says it is implementing shared policy in all of its departments, but on the other hand it is still committed to dirty fuels. You do not know if (the implementation

of an integrated policy) is really a commitment."

Greenpeace Africa argues that modern energy use should be the driving force in developing countries, despite the availability of cheap fossil fuels.

"What we are saying is that there should be more focus on renewable energy sources as South Africa's energy needs grow in the future. We understand that a plant such as Medupi (the new South African coal power plant scheduled for completion in 2012) cannot be stopped now, but that does not mean that Greenpeace supports coal plants. In future South Africa should focus on renewable energy and give up on planned plants like Kusile," says Adam.

Dr. Peter Johnston, a food production and climate change expert from the Department of Environmental Science at the [University of Cape Town](#), thinks a unified policy on climate change is a good idea.

"Implementation," he says, "while very difficult, will not be impossible.

"It is, however, critical that the necessary structure is put in place to implement the policy, with the necessary oversight from both inside and outside government... (it) is necessary in the oversight process to bring the necessary specialised skills on climate change to the table."

Johnston says it is the ideal time to implement a South African plan to fight climate change.

The South African government, meanwhile, will be hosting a series of events during the build-up to the conference to get people involved and educated about climate change. Campaigns will include educational road shows and community meetings in all the nine provinces in the coming weeks.

FOURTEEN) – AFRICA: MORE DANGEROUS TO BE A WOMAN THAN A SOLDIER

African women who bear the brunt of the continent's conflicts now demand to play a defining role in peacekeeping. A resolution to foster women's political participation in the domain of peacekeeping and conflict management was accepted on Friday at the 2011 Women's Platform for Action in Africa (WPAA). Under the auspices of the Pan-African Parliament (PAP), the WPAA meeting emphasised the urgent need for better female representation at national levels, where women can actively take part in decisions to prevent war and mediate conflict.

The two-day conference in Midrand from Sep. 29 to Sep. 30 comes ahead of the second session of the Pan-African Parliament in October.

Gender-based sexual violence, which has become a characteristic of armed conflict, is closely linked to gender relations within that culture, said Francoise Labelle of Mauritius who is second vice-president of PAP. "It is only if women can play a full and equal part in the mediation processes that we will be able to build a foundation of peace," Labelle said.

This year marks the 11th year of United Nations' resolution 1325, which addresses women's rights in war conflict, peace negotiation and reconstruction processes.

It also urges increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in conflict resolution and peace processes.

However, there has never been a female U.N. chief peace negotiator and women constitute less than eight percent of negotiating delegations in peace processes mediated by the U.N., while less than three percent are peace agreement signatories.

Women and young girls remain disproportionately affected during and after conflict. "It is more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier during conflict," said President of the PAP Women's Caucus Mavis Matladi of South Africa.

"There is probably not a single African woman who has not witnessed violence against another woman. It is the truth that men fight wars and the women are the victims; whether by way of infrastructure breakdown, being forced to turn to sexual exploitation for survival or the after-effects of stigmatisation, forced pregnancies and STDS (sexually transmitted diseases)," she said.

Matladi said that although governments on the continent have shown commitment to the resolutions, there has been less emphasis on the roles women can play before, during and after conflict.

"Women usually play these parts informally, but formally there is little recognition. This exclusion leads to a failure to address women's issues," she said.

Marie Louise Baricako, the Chairperson of the Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), an international non-governmental organisation working on issues of gender, peace and development, said that the problem of rape and sexual violence being used as a weapon remains a neglected topic.

"It goes unpunished, and unrecognised. The perpetrators remain free, bringing in a new culture of rape and sexual violence; the Pan-African Parliament must do something about this," she said.

The WPAA heard the testimony of a rape survivor who was targeted during post-election violence in Kenya.

The post election period of 2007 to 2008 left more than 1,100 people dead, 3,500 injured and up to 600,000 forcibly displaced. According to the International Criminal Court, during the two months after the disputed election results, "there were hundreds of rapes, possibly more, and over 100,000 properties were destroyed in six of Kenya's eight provinces."

The court is currently prosecuting six people accused of instigating the post-election violence. The rape survivor described how she was gang-raped, violated with metal implements, had acid poured over her and was left for dead while her house burnt in front of her. "I was in a bad state, my body was rotting. I couldn't wear proper clothes because they would stick to my skin. But God has created me a new skin. "I now have the strength to speak out and face women who've been raped and tell them to come out and stand their ground," she said. She also lauded the efforts of women parliamentarians who are working to end the atrocities perpetrated against women.

U.N. Women Regional Programme Director Nomcebo Manzini said the work of the WPAA should move beyond sitting and listening to the testimonies of those brutalised by conflict. "We should be saying no to war," she said.

To this end, under the auspices of the Pan-African Parliament, the resolution to form the Initiative of African Women for Peace (IAWP) was agreed upon in principle.

This delegation of women representing each of the continent's five regions will be tasked with promoting democracy, peace and security and will also lobby at international institutions such as the U.N., African Union and World Bank.

IAWP will also actively seek the support of like-minded associations, civil society and African women activists.

Premier of the North West province in South Africa Thandi Modise said that while policies looked good on paper, they were failing on the ground.

"Governments have ratified but the implementation is lacking. It doesn't matter how many seats we occupy, if these women don't speak for women, we might as well not have them. There are women who can lead these countries in Africa; we are the consciences of our nations and this continent. Is it not time we spoke up collectively in one big voice?"

Goodwill Ambassador to the World Health Organization, Dr. Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania and the first president of PAP, urged the meeting to not subscribe to conflict for the sake of democratisation.

FIFTEEN) – CAMEROON: PROTECT YOUR DAUGHTERS, IRON THEIR BREASTS

"Please God, make my breasts disappear." Joyce Forghab used to pray the same line every night during the month she was suffering from breast ironing. The shocking practice, carried out by a quarter of mothers in Cameroon, is meant to reverse female sexual development.

Joyce was only eight years old when the drama began. Her mother would take a flat stone and heat it over the fire for several minutes until it was burning. "She protected her hands because she knew it was really hot. She took it, pressed it against my breasts and massaged them really well," recalls Joyce, now 25 years old. "It was very, very painful... I had to run away from the house. It was horrible."

Joyce's experience is no exception in Cameroon. An estimated one in four girls suffers from the practice in their childhood. Breast ironing is a traditional ritual in which, by using heated and flat objects, a girl's growing breasts are pressed in order to suppress and reverse their development. The act is usually performed by a girl's mother or aunt.

To iron breasts they mostly use a wooden pestle or a stone, other tools employed include coconut shells, grinding stones, ladles, spatulas and hammers – all carefully heated over burning coals.

"Breast ironing has existed as long as Cameroon has existed," says Sinou Tchana, Cameroonian gynaecologist and vice-president of the Cameroonian Association of Female Doctors. In the early nineties, when her association started touring the ten regions of Cameroon to find out what practices could have been affecting female sexuality, they were shocked by the prevalence of breast ironing in most parts of the country. "We explained that it was not good, but the mothers and the aunts told us that it was normal for them that when the breasts are developing they have to iron them to avoid their growing. They did not see the dangers of what they were doing," explains Dr. Tchana.

Widespread

Renata, a women's association in Cameroon, reported in 2006 that the breast ironing rate was most prevalent in two Cameroonian areas: the Coast at 53 percent and the North-West, at 31 percent. Renata's study also showed that it was more common in the Christian and Animist South (30-50 percent) than in the

Muslim North (10 percent).

Although breast ironing is most widely practised in Cameroon, it also occurs in Guinea-Bissau, West and Central Africa, including Chad, Togo, Benin and Guinea-Conakry.

Doctor Tchana often comes across both victims and perpetrators of the ritual in her clinic. Often, mothers do not realise what they are doing to their daughters. She recalls one woman coming in to the practice about a year ago, begging for forgiveness: "Forgive me doctor, I was not measuring the pain, but when I burnt myself I realised the type of suffering my little girl had to endure," she cried. The woman was ironing her daughter's breast when she burnt her hand. That is why she had come to see the doctor. "When they take the stone from the fire they start ironing one breast first. In the case of that girl, one was really, really destroyed; the other one was not as bad. But the result is the same. Now one breast is smaller than the other one," said Dr. Tchana.

Breast ironing leads to two main opposite effects on women's breasts. On one hand, it can reduce its size considerably, leaving girls flat-chested. Or, it provokes rather the opposite reaction: by destroying the breast tissue, the breast just becomes a bag of fat without any muscle or shape. This is what happened to Joyce.

"My breasts have collapsed because of breast ironing. It has nothing to do with giving birth, because before having my child I already had the problem. I cannot be without my bra; I need it all the time, even when I am sleeping or feeding my baby," she said.

Dr. Tchana clarifies: "Really small breasts usually are due to the fact that families used the 'right0 technique. This means the stones were not too warm and the breasts are ironed equally all over. On the contrary, when bad techniques are used – very hot stones and quick ironing – oversized breasts and burning are major consequences. In all cases, however, you have problems of reconstruction and it is very expensive because nobody now would pay for it."

Apart from being painful and psychologically traumatic, breast ironing exposes girls to multiple health problems. According to many medical reports, it can lead to abscesses, itching, inability to breastfeed the babies, infection, deformity or disappearance of the breasts, cysts, tissue damage and even breast cancer. "I had one girl who died of breast cancer aged 24. You can have breast cancer in the cases in which the ironing is so intense that it destructs all the breast tissue," explains Dr. Tchana.

So why?

With all the medical evidence present, why do a quarter of Cameroonian girls still have to experience the torturous practice? Ze Jeanne, a 57-year-old Cameroonian woman and mother of eight, clarifies her reasons. "When the breasts of a young girl start growing, any man can come to her and try to have sex with her so, in order to help the girls continue school, we have to do breast ironing," she says.

She sits calmly in an armchair in her house, twenty minutes from Yaoundé city centre. Her daughter Clarisse is lying in a sofa next to her. Ze explains that she ironed the breasts of all her daughters when they started developing too early.

"In her case," says Ze pointing to Clarisse, "her breasts started growing at nine, so I was obliged to do breast ironing to her in order to stop it. I did not do it to destroy the breast, but to help the girl," she insists. Breast ironing is justified by Cameroonian women for many reasons. Apart from being historically rooted in their culture, it is used to avoid sexual contact between young girls and boys. By preventing girls' bodies from the sign of emerging sexuality, mothers try to make sure that their girls remain virginal and pure and prevent them from becoming visibly fertile women - and potential mothers.

Mothers are not completely unjustified in their fears. Early sexual encounters can lead these young teenagers to unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, possible rapes or the transmission of sexual diseases. Burning girls' emerging breasts to many mothers seems a far better option than the risk of the above. It is a measure born out of love and care for their daughters, they argue. But does it work?

Most of the young victims of breast ironing say the practice is extremely painful. And they insist that still does not prevent sexual attention.

"It is not the best way of avoiding pregnancies because after all, somebody like me can still get pregnant. I had a child before getting married, so in my case it did not help at all. For me it (sexual awareness) is all in the head. Once you get older, you think twice about the risks you are taking," says Joyce.

Mother Ze sees the matter differently. She believes breast ironing has saved her and her daughters from unwanted pregnancies by avoiding them looking womanly too early. "My daughters have accepted that breast ironing is part of our tradition. When the girl is still young, it is risky for her to let her breasts develop. It is risky for her future. If she would have an unwanted pregnancy at that age, things would be difficult for her later on."

Although Ze believes her youngest daughter Clarisse accepts breast ironing, the girl's reaction suggests

something else. When Clarisse is asked whether or not she will do it to her daughter, she replies emphatically: "I would not do that to my child."

The taboo related to sexuality is huge and obvious throughout Cameroon. Many girls are having their breasts ironed not even knowing why. "At the age of nine, girls did not know about sex so I did not explain them anything. However, when they were eleven and started asking: 'Why did you do this to me when I was nine?' I gave them some explanations," says mother Ze.

Joyce, on the other hand, demanded an explanation from the first moment she had a burning stone on her chest. "My mum told me that I was too young to have breasts and if she allowed me to have them then men would come near me. She also said that I would not be able to grow tall," she recalls.

Men have no idea

Joseph Ngondi, a 29-year-old Cameroonian man, came across breast ironing when he was 26. He was in a hotel room with his new girlfriend. It was their first night together. When she took her top off, he saw that instead of breasts, she had two dark patches on her flat chest. He was shocked.

"I started asking to myself what happened to that girl, I was even afraid, thinking of an illness which could have affected her," says Joseph, "The girl noticed my strange look at her breasts and decided to hide them. She felt ashamed."

He asked her what happened to her breasts. "Then she revealed to me that her mother ironed her breasts when she was 11. It was not easy for the girl to decide to tell me that story."

Especially in cities, where breast ironing is performed as a contraceptive method rather than a tradition alone, many men remain unaware of the practice. Joseph was clueless about it, too: "It was only at that moment that I realised what breast ironing really was. Before that, I just used to hear about it, but without any explanation."

Many Cameroonian mothers who perform the ritual as a contraceptive measure often do not talk about it with relatives. Georgette Taku, executive secretary of Renata's women's association, explains: "They hide it because sometimes there is no discussion in the family about sexual education. Plus, women are the ones supposed to take care of the children and, eventually, if the girl becomes pregnant, the mother is the one to blame."

According to Taku, in many Cameroonian families when a young teenager becomes pregnant, the father can force both mother and daughter to leave the house.

On the other hand, in rural areas where breast ironing is performed as a ritual more than as a contraceptive method, men are completely aware of it. "There is nothing to hide. It is not a bad thing according to the tradition and everyone in the family should be present," says mother Ze.

Breast ironing victim Joyce agrees with this, and says some men in rural areas even perform the practice themselves: "Every man knows about it and if their wife has passed away, they are supposed to do it."

"Grandma wants to burn me"

"Mama, mama... Please, come! Grandma wants to burn me!" This is the desperate call that Dr. Tchana received from her daughter Kat in 1997.

"She was 11 years old then and was spending her holidays in Bangangté, the village I come from. My mother-in-law is a very qualified midwife there and wanted to iron Kat's breasts. I will never forget my daughter's call, she was so afraid. I said to Kat: 'Do not worry, I am coming, just tell Grandma that you want Mama to be there when you are having breast ironing!'"

It was a Friday, 7pm, and Dr. Tchana took her car and raced to the village. "My mother-in-law was very angry because my daughter had called me. I told her not to do it, 'I am a doctor, I know better than you', I said. She told me that she was a nurse and she also knew what she was doing. Finally, Kat's breast were not ironed, I would never have allowed it."

Origins

The geographical origins of breast ironing are unclear. While many Cameroonians claim that it is a tradition from the rural areas, other sources such as the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ) reported in 2007 that it was more frequently practiced in cities than in villages.

It has been little more than a century since Cameroon developed cities such as Yaoundé, its political capital, founded in 1888; or Douala, its economic capital and the largest Cameroonian city. This might reinforce the 'rural origin' hypothesis. Plus, the fact that breast ironing is more publicly criticised in cities, might convey the perception that its practice is higher in rural areas.

Nevertheless, the 'city origin' argument also carries weight. Since Cameroonian girls' rate of studies is considerably higher in cities than in villages, mothers may well be more likely to practice of breast ironing

so their daughters keep up with their studies without being burdened by an unwanted pregnancy. Dr. Tchana says that it is practised both in cities and in rural areas, but argues the risk is higher in cities. "Because of the pain that breast ironing causes, many young girls run away from their houses. While in villages they would go to their aunt's, Chief's or neighbours' home, the city has more dangers outside." Ironically, the practice this way can lead to more unwanted pregnancies. As Dr. Tchana explains: "Many of these (runaway) girls have nothing and live in their boyfriend's house. If he asks her for sex she feels she cannot say no... What else can they do?"

Bellies targeted

Unfortunately, breasts are not the only target for "ironing" in Cameroon. Belly ironing, also known as postpartum massaging, is another harmful traditional practice present in the country. According to Renata, it is even more widespread than breast ironing, being just as painful and also leaving women with horrible physical and psychic scars.

In belly ironing, a traditional broom steeped in boiling water is used to whip the belly of a woman who has just given birth. Then, a towel is soaked in boiling water to massage the different parts of the body and in some regions, the woman is asked to sit on a bucket of hot water so the vapour penetrates her vagina and uterus.

Even this can cause burns, vaginal infections, cervix damage or scars, Cameroonian women accept it because the tradition says that it is very important to evacuate the remaining blood after delivering a baby. "It is practically impossible not to notice that the massage is being done in the neighbourhood because the painful cry of the victim awakes the neighbours early in the morning," mentions Renata's guide about sexual health.

It is not unusual to walk around Yaoundé's neighbourhood and hear the desperate cry of a girl coming from a house. The anxiety felt by a foreigner thinking "What is going on in there?," "What is happening to that poor girl?" is in contrast with the apparent indifference shown by Cameroonians, who continue with their lives without paying any attention to the shouts.

A sign of sexual maturity

Traditional harmful practices against women are manifold across human history. They include tortures such as Chinese foot binding, rib-breaking corsets, female genital mutilation and the chastity belt of the Middle Ages. All shared a common purpose: to benefit men, either by assuring women's fidelity or by improving their beauty according to contemporary taste.

Breast ironing is different. Instead of trying to benefit men, this is one of the few practices that tortures women for their own "good" in a distorted effort by women on women to protect them from men by making them less desirable.

In understanding Cameroonian society, the significance of breasts and their symbolic value must be taken into account. "A girl can get married as soon as she starts having breasts," explains Renata's spokesperson Taku. "The breasts show that a girl is ready to have sex."

During her school days, Joyce was known as "Miss Lolo" alluding to her early growing breasts. "I felt very, very ashamed. I thought, 'If my parents are ironing my breasts at that age it means that I am not supposed to have them.' To have breasts was like a taboo, like something bad. So I used to walk putting my hand over my breast in order that people do not to see it. I was not feeling free."

Ze's mother did it to her, Ze did it to her daughters and she has no doubt that one day she will do it to her granddaughters, too. She doesn't feel she owes anyone an explanation: "Most of us Bantu people do it as a tradition, without any specific explanation. You just have to accept it like that." This is how most of Cameroonian girls are expected to deal with breast ironing. Accepting it and, as Joyce did, praying God to make their breasts disappear. (Street News Services)

Fernando Matos Rosa

Brussels

