

1989 update

Economic & Pol. changes

Am. Police Brutality

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Dear Friends:

We begin by wishing you a Merry Christmas (before you receive this), Happy New Year lasting throughout the next 12 months, a blessed Easter (after you get this letter) and lots of good things in between.

We are grateful that we got to see a few of you last summer even if it had to be very few indeed. This was not the year for our normal rotation to visit in the states. That will come again in 1991. By special arrangement, we had the time needed for the visit at our own expense, primarily for personal and family reasons. We also used the occasion (as we always do in the states) for fairly thorough medical and dental checkups. We are both doing quite well for our age.

We were most fortunate in getting an extremely low-fare flight from London to Montreal and back. The routing also made it possible to see a number of close friends we had not seen for several years, some for up to 14 years, as we traveled across the continent by bus. Praise the Lord for friends! "Friendship is to people as sunshine is to flowers."

In our previous letter we indicated we were not personally affected by the riots of October 1988 but that changes were in the making that most people felt would be for the good. Indeed this country, ahead of the communist countries of eastern Europe, revised its constitution to eliminate the one-party system and create an open multi-party situation. At this writing there are already 13 new parties legally recognized and some others still awaiting legal recognition. The old party, the National Liberation Front, the one that had led the entire 7 1/2 - year struggle for independence (1954-62), remains by far the largest and best organized group but has lost its right to monopolize government (with all the temptations that entails) and its right to control the press and all the mass movements (the one labor union, one farmers' group, one woman's organization, one student union, scouts, etc. etc.). Parallel groups in some of these areas are already forming. Later on, of course, there will new elections that will reveal the relative significance of the various political parties. It will be interesting also to see how some of the other new, non-political groups tend to reinforce one or another of the new parties.

The religious situation has close links with the political as is normal for most countries with a strong Muslim majority. Those links may take many different forms, however. Here, by far the largest and best organized of the new parties calls itself the Islamic Front for Salvation (national rather than individual salvation) and has in effect given legal expression to an extremely conservative movement that has been growing here over the past 15 years or more with most of its inspiration coming from the Middle East. Their central conviction is that the whole of their society must be basically structured on the traditional body of Muslim laws, rules and regulations worked out for the most part over the 7th and 9th centuries. Most of the ensuing elaborations merely represent extensions required in facing new situations unknown



in the earlier period. They see this return to their religious roots as essential to their salvation as they move into the modern, industrialized world, many of whose benefits are desired but bring with them the influences of a morally decadent Western civilization. Most other people accuse them of giving too narrow an interpretation to Islam (even narrower than the old traditional system would really seem to require). They are also accused of spawning fanatical excesses that include harrasing people physically, especially women who have refused to adopt the traditional Muslim style of dress in one or another of its forms. At the same time, a number of small but active women's rights groups have been springing up, taking advantage of the new laws making it fairly easy to form all sorts of non-political organizations. They have succeeded in mobilizing even some men for their public meetings and a few street demonstrations. They are determined to wage an active campaign against wide-spread and deeply ingrained male chauvinism and especially against the influence of the conservative traditionalists. Both politically and religiously, there is at once growing polarization and new ferment in the society.

On the economic front, a certain amount of decentralization in regard to the big national companies and more encouragement of small private business had been in the works for a couple of years already. The process has been accelerated. Still, the country must face most of the problems common to the third world. One big problem is that the overall economic situation of the country seems considerably worse than the general public and even the foreign creditors had realized. Everyone knew that the sharp drop in oil and gas revenues a few years back hit the country very hard since it was something like 95-98% dependent on such revenues for its hard currency. Where most were wrong was in believing the national debt (and hence the cost of servicing it) was much smaller than it really is. The population explosion remains another serious economic burden in spite of the campaigns for family planning that have already shown some small statistical results. Economic austerity will have to remain <sup>the</sup> in order of the day for some years to come.

This past year has also brought us closer to problems in our good old U.S.A. Our second son, apparently because he wore extremely long hair and dared to question why he should be stopped and interrogated during a peaceful stroll through an empty park late one Saturday morning, became a victim of police brutality resulting in 29 stitches in his scalp. He was then accused of assaulting the two officers and of resisting arrest! Fortunately, he recovered reasonably quickly from his head wounds; but then it took about seven months and a jury trial to get himself acquitted. The greater tragedy is that there must be many victims of such abuse (especially among various minority and sub-culture groups) who cannot defend themselves so effectively. So what's new? The need for understanding, trust, justice and peace is as great as ever everywhere; and the essential foundation for all of that is fraternal love as we have heard it taught and seen it demonstrated by the one who came as the Christmas child. There's the Good News that is forever new.

Fraternally yours with  
our love<sup>†</sup> prayers,

David & Carol Butler