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Lifeline For Children

IT MAY only be R260 a month – more than what many people spend on luxuries a day – but for thousands of poor families across the country, it is a lifeline to survival.

The government's extension of the child support grant to children up to the age of 18 will therefore come as a relief to such families for whom state handouts are their only income, as the testimonies before the Black Sash showed.

Like any other handouts, the child grant system too is open to abuse, and critics will be quick to point to stories about girls deliberately falling pregnant in order to be able to access the grants.

Such critics, however, underestimate the level of poverty that exists in rural areas and the impact it is having on children. On-the-ground evidence gathered by groups like Black Sash paint a picture of a very real need for the grants so families can have access to essentials like food and clothes.

The other argument against child grants is that it creates dependency and a culture of entitlement. Again there will always be such lazy opportunists – even in the most affluent of societies – who will choose to live their lives on the dole, or its equivalent, instead of trying to earn a living.

Our situation in SA, however, is very different. The imbalance between the rich and poor is so skewed that very few of the disadvantaged have a chance of getting a job or bettering their situations and, without a helping hand, would be left to perish. Children, especially, have no choice about their circumstances, so as a society – and especially the state – we are duty-bound to provide for our children to give them a chance in life.

The tragedy is that with the pool of people relying on state grants – the latest statistics show that 10.3 million children alone were receiving grants – getting bigger every year, the burden of providing for them will become too much for the state to bear. It is a crisis not too far down the line.

Tackling Tehran

THE DECISION this week by the EU to ban imports of Iranian oil from July has sparked renewed threats from Tehran to close the Strait of Hormuz. It makes even more perilous a confrontation that could yet lead to war.

The impact of an EU embargo, given the global nature of the oil market, cannot be measured precisely. Beyond doubt, however, it will tighten the squeeze on Iran's economy, already in deepening trouble.

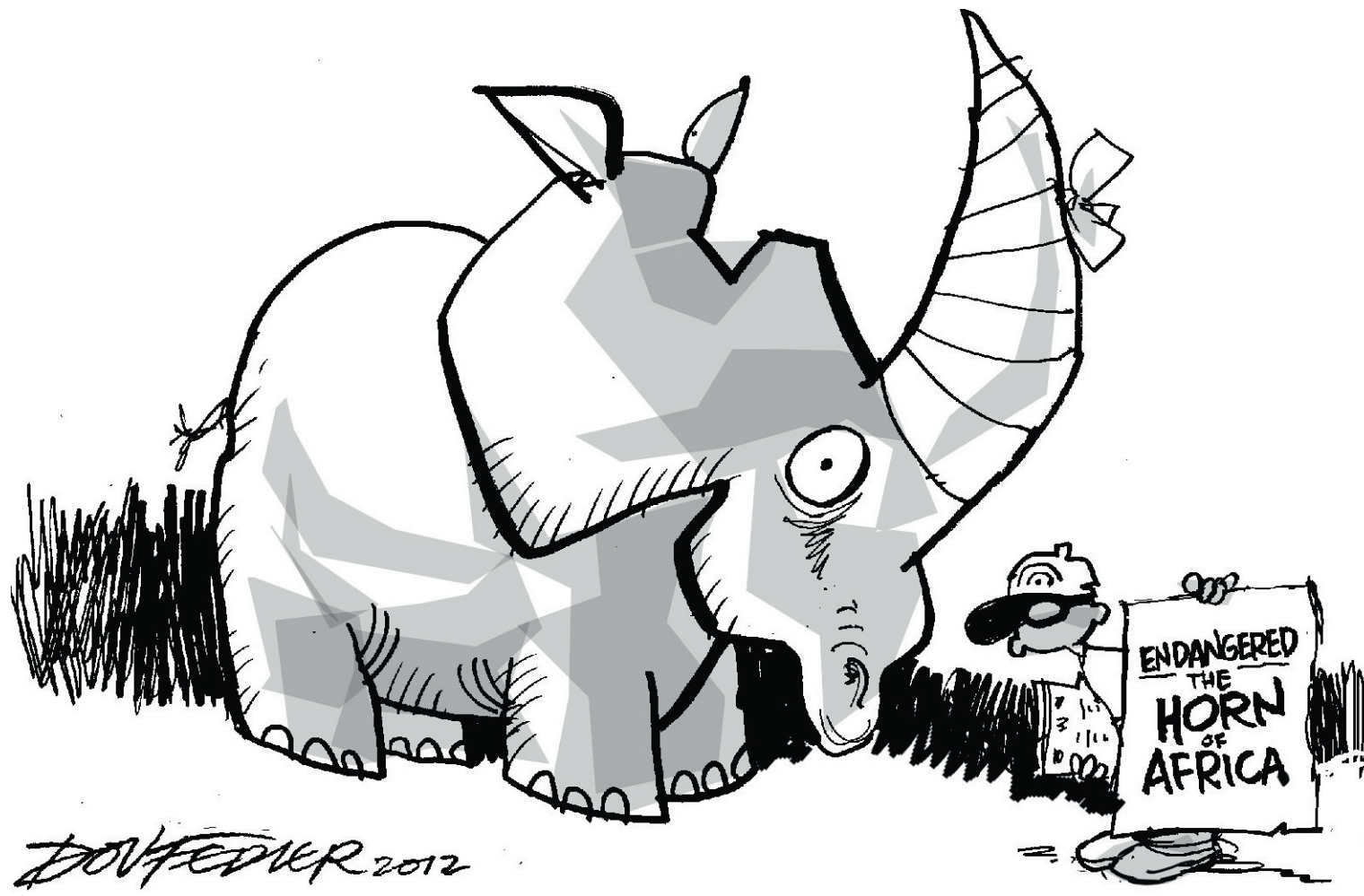
Meanwhile, Washington has warned Tehran that any closure of the strait, through which a fifth of the world's crude oil supplies are shipped, would cross a "red line" – meaning the US and its allies would use force if necessary to keep them open.

President Barack Obama has thus far played a difficult hand with impressive steadiness. Early in his term, he offered direct talks without preconditions (which Tehran turned down), and resisted demands from the Netanyahu government for a pre-emptive strike against installations. All the while, he has steadily intensified sanctions.

But, in an election year, the pressure on Obama to be "tough on Iran" will only grow. As tensions increase, it is vital to remember that the West's goal is to bring Iran not to the battlefield but the negotiating table.

The sanctions are working. Iran's internal politics are in turmoil – its key regional ally, Syria, is in danger of imploding, and some Iranian politicians say they want to talk. A mission next week by inspectors from the UN's nuclear watchdog agency is an opportunity to test their sincerity.

In short, the time for a deal has not yet run out. Nor must our patience. – The Independent



You & Me
 By Rod Smith

A READER writes: "I met a man around four years ago on the internet after I posted an ad on the website 'seeking sex with no strings attached'. I met someone for coffee and then he took me to his brother's home where we had sex."

"I specifically asked if he was married and he said he was not. In the four years since then, we have been together on and off. I was truly turned upside this past weekend when I found out that not only is he married, but that he has been married for almost 23 years and that they have two children."

"I have been on a roller-coaster ever since. What should I do?" (Letter shortened)

I am going to appeal to readers to respond to this question. I will be the sole judge of replies and the winner will receive a R200 Exclusive Books gift card. I will be looking for evidence of kindness, humour, and razor-sharp, good advice.

Please keep responses to 200 words. Use full sentences and real words. I will immediately delete any letters with "text" style writing. I just can't bear the laziness I see in some of the mails I receive. I spend hours creating correct sentences – please do the same.

□ Rod Smith is a family therapist who lives in the US. E-mail questions to Rod@DifficultRelationships.com.

Tides of opportunity are turning

Those seeking a better life or experience are now moving to places like Angola or Brazil as the lure of Europe fades



By Imraan Buccus

THE TIDES of history are turning. Outside of the social democracies in the north and the German powerhouse in the centre, European power is on the wane.

Brazil, India and China are the waking giants of the future. Economies are rising across much of Africa too.

But in southern Europe, as well as Ireland and England, and, of course, America, the decline is steep.

Poverty is spreading and the rich are retreating to gated enclaves. In these countries, young people face a future much tougher than the life faced by their parents.

Greece and Spain simply have no short term economic prospects at all.

In Athens, thousands of young graduates and professionals queue at the Australian and American consulates. In Madrid, the bright young minds are looking to Argentina, Ecuador and Venezuela.

In Lisbon thousands of Portuguese professionals queue at the Angolan and Mozambican embassies. The descendants of Vasco da Gama and his crew are not leaving to plunder new worlds for the old; they are simply es-

caping old Europe as it sinks into a crisis so profound that there's no clear way out aside from placing more demands on the German taxpayer.

There are more than 4.3 million Portuguese living abroad. The Portuguese have even become an essential part of the fabric of SA life. Peri peri chicken is as South African as pap, the bunny chow or boerevors.

Ruinous

Of course the 15th century emigration from Portugal has very little similarity with that of 2012. The same is true of the emigration of the 1950s and 1960s.

In those days the Portuguese coming to Africa started as workers, many in low paid jobs in Angola and Mozambique, and then moved up the economic ladder that colonial regimes created for white people. They made a good life there for themselves

and their families.

The collapse of colonialism, however, and the ruinous economic policies adopted by the "Marxist-Leninist" regimes in Angola and Mozambique created new waves of emigration, either to SA or back to Portugal.

Portugal laboured under a neo-fascist dictatorship from the 1920s to the 1970s, but after it joined the EU in 1986 all kinds of opportunities opened up.

This was a new Portugal reaping the early benefits of an artificial unity and easy credit, where the new winds of neo-liberalism created a façade of a prosperous life dictated by the orders of financial capital and its axes – the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Alas, it is the spectre of these institutions that have led to the reversal. While the collapse of the dictatorship brought new highly skilled labour to Portugal, the first

cracks in the newly found optimism came quickly as both the social democratic and right-wing parties that ruled did so with visible corruption, greed, and avarice.

The international crisis of 2008 and beyond played its role and unemployment soared. Today, as in Italy and Spain, millions of young people simply cannot find a way to move their lives forward.

To say that Portugal is in dire economic and financial crisis would be an understatement.

Unsurprisingly, the crisis is creating a new wave of emigration, including an older stratum of people and old and new destinations. But this time it is not Switzerland or France, but Angola that is the favoured destination.

Its Portuguese numbers have soared to more than 100 000 lately. Angola's oil has created wealth and opportunity that calls the young professionals from Portugal

like a new El Dorado.

In the 1960s the Portuguese were fleeing from Angola. Now they flee to Angola. Two out of 10 graduates left Portugal for Africa in the past two years, joining the growing brain drain as part of what has been called the country's "lost generation", the biggest emigration wave since the 1960s.

Avaricious

Angola is one of the most corrupt countries on the planet. Its ruling elite is one of the most avaricious. And yet there are jobs there, and money to be made.

Antonio Bagal, a 32-year-old entrepreneur from Lisbon, has become a billionaire. More than 3 000 Portuguese companies are prospering in Angola.

As the wheels of history turn, the certainties of the past melt away in the furnace of the future.

Who would have imagined, in the years after the MPLA and Frelimo swept into Luanda and Maputo, that in 2012 the best and the brightest of Portuguese youth would have to look to these same cities for their careers?

The days when London and New York were the centre of the world and its opportunities are passing.

The great cities of the future are Bombay, Sao Paulo and Beijing. Our children should be learning Hindi, Portuguese and Mandarin. We need to look east our young people to look east and south.

The days when "overseas" meant England are long gone. England's future will be a country of an elite barricaded in against its poor and doing little more than running a theme park for the people with real money – the Brazilians, Indians and Chinese. Our own young people would do far better to take a gap year in Sao Paulo or Luanda than London.

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forum

E-mailed letters should also include a physical address and telephone number. The editor reserves the right to edit or shorten letters. Letters with pseudonyms will only be published in exceptional circumstances.

Profits trump passengers' safety

PETER Ustinov, actor, wit and raconteur, would only sail on Greek or Italian ships as, in his opinion, there was no nonsense about women and children first.

You can see his point of view after the Costa Concordia debacle.

Passenger ships are supposed to be designed to sink slowly in an upright condition allowing for easier passenger evacuation, so what went wrong on Concordia will no doubt come out in due course at the enquiry.

Cruise ship owners in their ivory towers in Miami can only think in terms of bigger ships, cheaper and sometimes inferior crews and the massive

profits they can make. They have all the necessary lifeboats, life rafts and watertight doors required by international maritime law, but no consideration is made for thousands of panicking passengers and crew.

Not everyone can be like the orchestra on the Titanic who played on until she went down, or Faizal Agjee, who did not lose his cool, but sensibly went about saving his family.

The natural reaction of passengers in these situations is to panic, and who can blame them?

Those same owners decide what exotic islands their ships will visit to encourage more passengers and to entertain

them, but are these islands safe?

Some years ago the Queen Elizabeth II was showing her passengers a view one of these exotic islands in the Caribbean when she grounded on a reef, causing enormous damage to her hull.

The International Maritime Organisation could revise their regulations as regards passenger ship size and what exotic islands or ports they can visit, but that is very doubtful considering the money involved and the competition between companies.

ILLOYD

Durban North

NO TAXATION TILL LOOTING STOPS

THE AUDITOR-general's recent report for 2011 has revealed that within various government departments, the amount of R20 billion in taxpayers' money has simply disappeared (The Mercury, January 17).

He intimated that the loss was because of wastage, incompetence, negligence and corruption.

Willie Hofmeyr also gave a similar report to Parliament just before his being fired as the head of the Special Investigating

Unit. His figure, however, was more in the region of a R30bn loss to government, due to similar reasons as those given later by the auditor-general.

The auditor-general's annual report is practically the same as that of last year and will inevitably be similar next year. No one is ever fired. No one is ever charged or has appeared in court in this connection.

Even Sicoelo Shiceka who, although fired by Zuma, partly for his abuse of taxpayers' money, is still

an MP and therefore receiving a huge salary as well as massive tax-free perks.

He has also not yet paid back the thousands of rand in taxpayers' money he illegally used to visit his girlfriend in jail in Europe.

It is doubtful that the ANC will insist that he pays back the money.

During the apartheid era, the ANC encouraged people not to pay their income tax with the justified cry, "no taxation without political

representation".

These days perhaps the justified cry should be "no taxation until the looting stops and the alleged culprits are fired, appear in court and are made to pay back their ill-gotten gains".

Enough is surely enough.

This looting cannot be sustained without an eventual implosion of law and order on a massive scale.

FRANK HARTRY

Durban

MF loses chance to elect a leader

AS A member of the KZN Legislature I worked with Shamen Thakur Rajbansi for 10 years. She is very competent and approachable and I am sure she will cope with the demands of leadership.

However, what a pity that the Minority Front could not move into the 21st century and become a party that supports the democratic process.

Party members have been denied the opportunity to elect a leader. Instead they are forced to abide by the wishes of their deceased leader – this is not democratic.

MARGARET

Durban

AMBLER-MOORE

It is time for Tutu to retire

IT CAME as no surprise that Archbishop Desmond Tutu could not resist the opportunity for some publicity by climbing in on the suspected killer Johan Kotze's case (The Mercury, January 18).

Surely the time has come for the former archbishop to retire from his publicity-seeking role in view of his recent statements and actions.

Some examples include his ridiculous suggestion for an

extra tax for whites; and a poorly attended concert at Kings Park Stadium prior to the opening of COP17. Almost daily World Cup soccer appearances and comments on many newsworthy events.

I wonder if Tutu will ever realise he has enjoyed an amazing innings but that he has now reached the retirement stage in his life?

GEOFF OLDFIELD

Durban

Any Republican will be better than Obama

I WAS most disappointed reading Allister Sparks's column "The danger of Obama's rightist challengers" (The Mercury, January 18).

He has obviously not been following events in the US too closely considering his ill-advised and incorrect statements. He describes Barack Obama as a "liberal" and the only person who can bring economic sanity to the US. This is so far from the

truth and laughable.

Far from being a liberal, Obama is a far left-wing radical and his neo-Marxist domestic economic policies have been disastrous. In just three years as president he has raised the national debt by \$8 trillion (R64 trillion) – vastly more than any of his predecessors, and he has done it in a shorter period of time.

In terms of foreign policy he is weak, naive and doing his

best to appease radical dictatorships. He has made the US the laughing stock among the country's violent enemies.

Obama can rightly be described as the Neville Chamberlain of the 21st century.

Should Obama win a second term, in four years time the US will be on the brink of bankruptcy.

The Republicans have correctly vetoed every attempt

by Obama to turn the US into a Marxist welfare state.

Unfortunately Obama will probably go down in history as the worst president the US has ever had. The sooner he goes, the better. Almost any Republican candidate will be an improvement over his poor tenure. Let's hope sanity prevails.

ROB NIEMEYER

Durban

Post office clock should be fixed and maintained

EVERY morning on my way to work I pass the beautiful old majestic city post office building and every morning I look at the clock, and every morning it's not working.

This has now been going on for a year. Previously there was a family who had the contract to maintain the clock.

I am sure every day thousands of people look at the

clock for some sort of guidance, only to find, as yesterday and the day before and for many months before that, that it is still not working.

That clock is part of our heritage and our history. When is it going to be back in working order, and cared for?

G GORDON

Durban