

Speed Train

OUR rail transport system is in a fairly sorry state, having been neglected for years as passengers and goods moved over to road transport. In this it is not unique, many once-dominant railroads having closed or declined in importance in the United States and in several other countries.

Rail, nevertheless, remains extremely important in the context of our economy and the long distances between commercial nodes. Its resuscitation deserves attention and, indeed, the government has promised to sink major investment into rail infrastructure over the next few years.

Whether the proposed speed train between Durban and Johannesburg fits into this formula is a moot point.

The concept itself, outlined this week by KZN Premier S'bu Ndebele, is innovative and enticing. On the positive side, a faster passenger rail link would provide an alternative to road and air transport. This was evident in Germany, where such trains quickly moved many people between World Cup Soccer venues.

In South Africa it would stimulate tourism, and air passengers would also be saved the cost and time of commuting between city centres and outlying airports. There would also be lower usage on our burdened road system, particularly the N3 link between Johannesburg and Durban, which is by far the busiest national road in the country.

However, exciting as the concept is, the costs of providing infrastructure for a train to be able to average nearly 200km/h would be huge, given current gradients and track widths between Durban and Johannesburg. Regular usage of such trains would be essential if this was to become anything like an economically feasible and sustainable project, especially in view of low air fares and price wars between airlines.

Sadly, such services often do not break even in Europe, despite large populations and higher disposable incomes. Our government would probably have to provide very large investments and ongoing subsidisation of such services.

The speed train concept will have to be carefully examined on a cost-benefit basis and compared with other attractive but less ambitious possibilities. Even a halving of the current long rail travelling time between cities would be of major benefit.

SECOND OPINION

Surviving Reality

TRY as you might, it's difficult to avoid reality TV entirely. Even if you don't watch it, you'd be likely to encounter it in other media where contestants are analysed and criticised for public entertainment.

Survivor is the most successful of all the reality shows around the world. So it was inevitable that South African television would get its own version of the hit franchise. M-Net has certainly scored early on with the inaugural season of *Survivor South Africa*, the pilot being the most-watched episode of a reality TV show on the pay channel. This includes the finale of *Idols* and *Big Brother*.

Since viewers demand ever more controversy from reality TV, it is expected M-Net has designed its *Survivor* to deliver scandal – but not on the scale of the latest American season, which has set different races against each other to create “true tribes”.

Second Opinion is published for public interest and does not necessarily reflect the views of *The Mercury*

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You & Me
ROD SMITH

READER: I'm a stepmother to six children. When they were young I tried to do everything to make them happy.

No matter what I did I could not make them happy. I would do 10 good things then one bad thing and they would talk to their father and we would end fighting. Now I don't care what they say or think of me. Their father will pick them up on Friday night and drop them off with me and not show up until they are asleep.

All weekend while they're here he avoids them by sleeping. I've spoken to him about this and it goes in one ear and out the other.

I need to let stepmoms know they are not alone. Stepchildren and fathers can be horrible. I have children of my own from a first marriage. My husband treats them as invisible. We have a child together. I'm thinking of leaving before I go crazy. (Aggressive language removed.)

EVIDENCE suggests it is not only dad and children who have problems. I will remind readers that there are also step-parents who have had the most wonderful and fulfilling experiences with stepchildren, and who love and fully embrace their role as parents.

Rod Smith is a family therapist. Address questions to RodSmith@mac.com

Worldwide arms trade treaty long overdue

Each year small arms alone kill more people than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, writes Archbishop Desmond Tutu

FOR many years, I've been involved in the peace business, doing what I can to help people overcome their differences. In doing so, I've also learnt a lot about the business of war: the arms trade.

In my opinion it is the modern slave trade. It is an industry out of control: every day more than 1 000 people are killed by conventional weapons. The vast majority of those people are innocent men, women and children.

There have been international treaties to control the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons for decades. Yet, despite the mounting death toll, there is still no treaty governing sales of all conventional weapons, from handguns to attack helicopters.

As a result, weapons fall into the wrong hands all too easily, fuelling human rights abuses, prolonging wars and digging countries deeper into poverty.

This is allowed to continue because of the complicity of governments, especially rich countries' governments, who turn a blind eye to the appalling human suffering associated with the proliferation of weapons.

Each year small arms alone kill more people than the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki put together. Many more people are injured, terrorised or driven from their homes by armed violence.

Even as you read this, one of these human tragedies is unfolding somewhere on the

planet. You only need to pick up a newspaper to see the worldwide scale of the problem. From the conflict in the Middle East, to the killings in Darfur, to gun violence in Brazil, the lack of global controls on the arms trade is causing the suffering of innocent people.

Take the Democratic Republic of Congo, where armed violence recently flared up again, and millions have died during almost a decade of conflict. Despite a UN arms embargo against armed groups in the country, weapons have continued to flood in from all over the world.

Arms found during weapons collections include those made in Germany, France, Israel, US and Russia. The only common denominator is that nearly all these weapons were manufactured outside Africa.

Five rich countries manufacture the vast majority of the world's weapons.

In 2005, Russia, the United States, France, Germany and the UK accounted for an estimated 82% of the global arms



ARCH BISHOP DESMOND TUTU

market. And it's big business: the amount that rich countries spend on fighting HIV/Aids every year represents just 18 days' global spending on arms.

But while the profits flow back to the developed world, the effects of the arms trade are predominantly felt in developing countries. More than two thirds of the value of all arms are sold to Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America. It is no coincidence that many of the world's poorest countries have recently experienced armed conflict.

In addition to the deaths, injuries and rapes perpetrated with these weapons, the cost of conflict goes deeper still, destroying health and education systems.

For example, in northern Uganda, which has been devastated by 20 years of armed conflict, it has been estimated that 250 000 children do not attend school. The war in northern Uganda, which may now be coming finally to an end, has been fuelled by supplies of foreign-made weapons. And, as with so many other wars, the heaviest toll has been on

the region's children.

Children under five are always the most vulnerable to disease, and in a war zone adequate medical care is often not available as hospitals are destroyed and people flee to makeshift camps. Last year, it was estimated that 41% of all deaths in the camps for displaced people in northern Uganda were among children under five.

The world could eradicate poverty in only a few generations were only a fraction of the expenditure on the war business to be spent on peace.

An average of \$22 billion is spent on arms by countries in Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa every year, according to estimates for the US Congress. This sum would have enabled those countries to put every child in school and to reduce child mortality by two thirds by 2015, fulfilling two of the Millennium Development Goals.

This year, the world has the chance to finally say “no” to the continuing scandal of the unregulated weapons trade. In October, the world's govern-

ments will vote on a resolution at the UN General Assembly to start working towards an Arms Trade Treaty. That treaty would be based on a simple principle: no weapons for violations of international law. In other words, a ban on selling weapons if there is a clear risk that they will be used to abuse human rights or fuel conflict.

The UN resolution has been put forward by the governments of Australia, Argentina, Costa Rica, Finland, Japan, Kenya and the United Kingdom. These governments believe that “the idea of an arms trade treaty is one whose time has come”.

I agree. We must end impunity for governments who authorise the supply of weapons when they know there is a great danger that those weapons will be used for gross human rights abuses. Today, great strides are being made towards ending impunity for war criminals. It cannot be acceptable that their arms suppliers continue to escape punishment.

Fifty-five governments, including much of Africa, Latin America and Europe, now support an arms trade treaty. It also has widespread popular support: over one million people in over 150 countries have signed the Million Faces Petition supporting the call for such a treaty.

No longer should the peace business be undermined by the arms business. I call on all governments to put the control of the international arms trade at the top of their agenda.

Letters to the editor may be e-mailed to mercletter@inl.co.za or faxed to 031 308 2715. Alternatively, letters may be posted to The Editor, PO Box 47549, Greyville 4023.

forum

Letters must carry the author's signature, name and address. E-mailed letters should include a physical address and telephone number. The editor reserves the right to edit or shorten letters. Preference will be given to letters that carry the writer's name.

LAND REFORM POLICIES ARE CALAMITOUS

I READ the article “Government reassures property owners on its land reform policies” (*The Mercury*, September 8) very carefully and could not find anything in it which, in the circumstances in this country, reassures white land owners.

The minister of land affairs boasts about the rule of law, but the fact is that the government made a law which reneges on the

original “willing buyer, willing seller” principle, and legalises land grabbing by the government on the basis of racial discrimination against whites, and at very low prices, which are nowhere near market related.

A good example of this is the first expropriation of a white-owned farm, which occurred on September 22 2005. This farm comprised 500ha and had on it a

large modern farmhouse, its own butchery and other important structures, and was a going concern. The farmer was asking R3 million for this large piece of land, but the government gave him R1.75 million.

This is probably the only country in the world where the constitution rules that racial discrimination is forbidden, other than against whites, and on

that basis whites have been deprived of employment, businesses and farmland. Ironically, of about 70 farms transferred from white to black or government ownership in the past 10 years, at least half have failed to succeed. This proves how disastrous our land reform policies are.

ROGER LAYZELL

Durban

Country is too lenient on ‘alternative lifestyles’

WITH reference to the Bill on gay marriages, our country is spiralling downhill at an unprecedented rate.

It believes that because people have “alternative lifestyles” it is acceptable and we must cater for them. I suppose that is why criminals get away with their deeds. Very soon the constitution will be making room for incest, pornography in homes, bestiality, murder, etc – to accommodate those “alternative lifestyles”. We have sowed by our votes. Now we are reaping. When will we learn?

S SUBBIAH

Chatsworth

Early memories of bunny chows

I FOUND the article by Bonke Dumisa on the origin of the “bunny chow” (*The Mercury*, September 4) very interesting.

When I was a 12-year-old way back in 1955 we used to buy what in those days was called a “bunias-chow” (no doubt after the Gujarati bunias) from a small take-away shop in Umgini Road.

I therefore assume that the claim made by GC Kapitan Vegetarian Restaurant to have been the first to serve this fare dates back to before that time I have referred to.

W VAN VUUREN
Durban

Why shut down Banana Express?

FOR more than a decade I have visited South Africa annually for holidays as a tourist, mainly to ride on the unique Apple Express and Banana Express railways.

I am staggered at Spoornet's closing down of the latter, just when the leasing company, Alfred County Railway, had turned it into a profitable success! Thousands of like-minded tourists visited Port Shepstone and surrounding area, bringing in huge amounts of overseas currency to the coastal strip of KwaZulu-Natal.

One can only be staggered at Spoornet's blinkered action ... or is there a hidden

agenda? I constantly hear that Spoornet wish to sell off Port Shepstone Station and the seafront area – from which the railway leaves the town and runs along the coast until it turns inland into the hills – to multimillion-rand developers!

If this is the case and it goes ahead, the whole municipality will be the loser.

Surely all the local official bodies and the South African Tourism Department should be getting together to put pressure on Spoornet to re-open the line before the rolling stock is further vandalised beyond repair?

I have rarely seen such stupidity from a government-run organisation.

The Banana Express was the biggest draw for tourists and the largest finance earner for the whole of the coastal strip.

Common sense is no longer common, but if a concerted effort to put pressure on Spoornet is mounted, this wonderful, unique steam railway may yet survive.

It should have international heritage protection status. Closing it is madness!

GRAEME WALTON-BINNS
England

Mbekis should sue DA for privacy violation

THE brouhaha about the visit of the DA's Douglas Gibson to the Mbekis' new house is nothing but a publicity stunt by the party. The DA has embarked on a campaign to discredit the black leadership, portraying it as corrupt and failing to run the country properly.

Gibson's action to take a group of journalists to the house must be condemned in the strongest terms. This not only violates the president's right to privacy but also poses a major security risk for him.

I would be glad if the DA could let us know how much

the government is spending on providing security for former apartheid presidents P W Botha and F W de Klerk. If the DA is seriously committed to transparency, it must not be selective in its approach.

The Mbekis should take legal action against the DA as there has been a clear violation of the right to privacy. Gibson and the DA should apologise to the Mbekis and to South Africa for their recklessness.

VUKANI MBHELE
Durban