



Ireland's Celtic Tiger tramples some underfoot

By Gideon Long

DUBLIN, July 26 (Reuters) - Walk down the north bank of Dublin's River Liffey towards the docks and you cannot fail to be impressed by the orderly office blocks, smart hotels and new cafes which have been built on this once derelict land.

Turn away from the river and, just two streets away, a very different picture of Irish life starts to emerge.

Bored-looking kids sit outside a dilapidated red-brick house, its windows boarded up and its front door barred by a forbidding metal grille.

The streets are covered in litter, and plastic bags cling to the razor wire which separates this slice of urban malaise from the gated apartments of the International Financial Services Centre, just a stone's throw away.

Perhaps nowhere in Dublin is the contrast so stark between the old Ireland of deprivation, and the new Ireland of unprecedented wealth.

There is no doubt that the economic revolution of the past decade has made Ireland richer.

A United Nations report published this month showed the economy grew by 6.8 percent per year between 1990 and 2002, bettered only by China.

The average Irish worker now earns more than anyone in the world apart from the Norwegians and Luxembourgers.

The report showed that for the first time, per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is higher in Ireland than in the United States - a statistic rich in symbolism given the history of Irish emigration to the promised land of America.

But while the "Celtic Tiger" is undoubtedly alive and roaring, many question how fairly this much debated beast is distributing the wealth it creates.

The same U.N. study, the Human Development Report, placed Ireland 16th out of 17 developed countries on its poverty index, ahead only of the United States.

That suggests that, per head of the population, Ireland has more people living below the poverty line than any other country in the old 15-state European Union.

The report found that Ireland's life expectancy, at 76.9 years, is the second lowest in western Europe, and that it spends 4.9 percent of its GDP on its public healthcare system, lower than any of the other 16 developed countries surveyed.

Ireland has one of the highest rates of tuberculosis on the list and, at 73 percent of the population, the worst immunisation rate against measles.

The findings of the report were hotly disputed.

The government says the U.N. data is outdated and misleading because it is based on relative poverty, not absolute poverty, while anti-poverty campaigners say the government is tailoring the figures to fit its own argument.

"Our members working on the ground don't need statistics to tell them that poverty in the Celtic Tiger hasn't gone away but is growing," said Robin Hanan of the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), a non-governmental organisation that aims to put poverty issues at the top of the EU agenda.

"This is not the first report to show that Ireland is among the richest countries in the EU but still has the highest poverty rate.

"Instead of fighting over figures, we need a serious public debate about what kind of society we want to live in, how to provide the services and support to achieve this and what this implies for our tax system."

The U.N. report also showed that gender inequalities are higher in Ireland than in many other developed countries.

"The majority of people living below the poverty line in Ireland are women," said Orla O'Connor, head of policy at the National Women's Council of Ireland (NWCI).

"The fact is that women have been at greater risk of poverty than men since the 1990s and sadly this situation is not changing, despite Ireland's unprecedented growth rates."

The man widely credited for those growth rates - Finance Minister Charlie McCreevy - announced this month that he is to step down after seven highly eventful years in the job.

Social campaigners hope his departure will spark a shift in economic policy leading to greater, or at least more targeted, spending on health, education and welfare.

In the meantime, life in Dublin's docklands, while undoubtedly better than a generation ago, still appears to be a bitter-sweet affair - depending on which side of the razor wire you stand.

© Reuters 2004