World needs Japan in fight against diseases

Jeffrey Sachs and Joanne Carter
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The fight against AIDS, TB and malaria is a defining challenge of our historical moment.... Japan has the means, the knowledge and the historic wisdom to help lead the world in this fight. Japan has understood from its earliest days that good health is vital to economic and social development. Japan's tremendous investment, beginning early in the last century, in public health, disease control and the improved nutrition of its people led to increased life expectancy and catalyzed Japan's economic and social progress.

The strength of Japan's public health system was proved once again during the recent emergence of the SARS virus. Japan avoided a widespread outbreak of SARS because of the quality of its public health infrastructure.

Japan's understanding of the vital linkages between health and economic development globally was powerfully demonstrated at the Group of Eight summit in 2000 held in Okinawa, where Japan led the world in endorsing the most important health goals to emerge in decades: reducing by half deaths and illness due to tuberculosis (TB) and malaria, and reducing new HIV infections by 25 percent by 2010.

AIDS, TB and malaria are responsible for over 6 million deaths every year—yet nearly all of these deaths could be prevented or treated with existing strategies, if the resources and political commitment were made available.

At the Okinawa summit, Japan made a bold pledge to provide $3 billion (360 billion yen) over five years to forward these health goals. Achieving these goals would avert tens of millions of needless deaths in the next decade alone, and help secure greater global stability and productivity.

With all of its wisdom, awareness and scientific expertise, the world needs Japan now. Japan can and must be a powerful force in the fight against these killer diseases.

We have a particular opportunity at this moment. In the last two years, an innovative and highly effective new mechanism has emerged to channel resources to tackle these three diseases—the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. This Global Fund is an independent, multidonor mechanism that in less than two years has already committed $1.5 billion to tackle AIDS, TB and malaria in over 90 affected nations across the globe.

The Global Fund requires that the key constituencies come together in each country-government, the private sector, nongovernmental groups, donor agencies—to put forward effective proposals to combat these killers. And the fund will release resources based on real results achieved in these countries. In just its first two rounds of approved proposals, the fund anticipates that the
programs it will support will treat 2 million patients for TB, scale up anti-retroviral treatment for AIDS by 500,000, and treat some 30 million cases of malaria with new, more effective drugs.

The Global Fund is the best hope for a comprehensive global approach to battling these diseases. Yet the fund does not have the resources for approving a third round of proposals this October, nor for planned 2004 grants. The United States has pledged up to $1 billion to the Global Fund for 2004, but that pledge is conditional on other nations providing an additional $2 billion. Europe is stepping up to the plate. At this year’s G-8 summit in Evian, France, French President Jacques Chirac called on Europe to match the U.S. pledge with $1 billion of its own and committed France's share of that billion for each of the next three years. European Commission President Romano Prodi has also promised his efforts to deliver Europe’s $1 billion for the fund.

The world now needs Asian contribution, private foundations and others to do the same. Japan could play a critical role in making this happen.

The fight against AIDS, TB and malaria is a defining challenge of our historical moment. The Global Fund is our best new weapon in this fight and urgently needs a minimum of $3 billion to support lifesaving programs in 2003 and 2004.

Japan must help lead the effort in achieving the last $1 billion for the fund, joining Europe in moving forward to meet the U.S. challenge-by investing its own share of needed resources and supporting other nations to do the same. Japan has the means, the knowledge and the historic wisdom to help lead the world in this fight.

Jeffrey Sachs is director of Columbia University's Earth Institute and special adviser to U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the Millennium Development Goals. Joanne Carter is legislative director at RESULTS, an international grass-roots citizens advocacy organization working to create the political will to end hunger and the worst aspects of poverty. They contributed this comment to The Asahi Shimbun. There is no Yoichi Funabashi column this week.