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AIDS funds fall short

By Paul Zeitz and Jeffrey Sachs, 7/11/2003

WITH PRESIDENT Bush on his first trip to sub-Saharan Africa, his State of the Union pledge to deliver an emergency response to global AIDS is falling dangerously short on delivery, jeopardizing the lives of millions of Africans battling the disease.

Bush signed legislation authorizing \$3 billion this year to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. Yet his budget contains funds for only half of this goal. Moreover, there is little actual planning underway to implement a program that is already years late in being launched. There is still time for the president to make good on his promises so that the trip to Africa is not an empty "victory lap" with no real victories that count.

In January, Bush boldly proclaimed that "in an age of miraculous medicine" no person should be denied treatment for AIDS and announced that "this nation can lead the world in sparing innocent people from a plague of nature." Recently he set the standard by which America's efforts against AIDS should be judged: "We care more about results than words. We're interested in lives saved."

Since that speech, a million Africans have died of the disease while Bush has dithered on the emergency. In fact, since Bush has come into office, about 5 million Africans have died of AIDS while the US bilateral assistance programs under the president's watch have provided antiretroviral treatment for only a handful of people.

This week Bush named a coordinator of the new program. Randall Tobias, the former chief executive of Eli Lilly & Co., a major American pharmaceutical company, is a large campaign contributor and has no apparent experience in Africa, AIDS, or public health management. This appointment seems to constitute an abdication of real responsibility.

Nor has Bush addressed the dramatic crisis of AIDS orphans across Africa. There are 12 million children orphaned by AIDS, and millions more will become orphaned by the end of the decade, especially with America's laggard record of inaction and delay in getting parents under antiretroviral treatment, which is the surest way to stop the startling rise in the number of orphans. The children left behind lack care and support as well as the financial resources to continue in schooling.

Bush's AIDS initiative calls for the creation of a new US delivery system to get US aid to about a dozen countries in Africa.

There is a much more direct and meaningful way to give the aid: directly to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria. Instead of trying to create a new agency, the United States should leverage the global activities that are already underway. This is especially true since the administration has a weak track record in actual delivery of AIDS services in Africa. For example, in June 2002 Bush touted an initiative to prevent the transmission of HIV from mothers to newborns, yet after a year this "effort" has yet to provide a single mother with the needed medication.

The Global Fund is already supporting programs in dozens of countries and has proven itself to be the most dynamic and flexible AIDS control organization in the world. For the first time, people with AIDS are getting antiretroviral treatments that are pulling

them back from death. Bush unwisely has rejected multilateral approaches to combat infectious diseases even though multilateral efforts have been the most successful in the past, such as in the control of smallpox, African river blindness, and polio. The problem, from the administration's perspective, may be that the Global Fund is not run by the US pharmaceutical industry.

Under Bush's AIDS initiative, the United States is pledging \$200 million to the fund in the next fiscal year— just 70 cents per American, representing only 6.6 percent of the \$3 billion the fund calculates that it needs in 2004 to respond effectively to the AIDS emergency. The consequences are especially severe for the dozens of countries that will not be touched by the president's limited 14-country initiative. The United States should be giving at least \$1 billion to the Global Fund in 2004, helping to leverage another \$2 billion from other countries.

Bush promised that the AIDS funding would not come out of other assistance programs, but even this promise is not being fulfilled. His budget actually cuts other important global health and development programs rather than providing new money for AIDS, and Congress seems set to cut some of these programs even more steeply. Bush's budget includes cuts to refugee assistance (2.8 percent), development assistance (2.5 percent), other global health programs (14.3 percent), and international disaster assistance (18.3 percent). These cuts hurt the AIDS effort because AIDS is closely related to other health crises and rooted in poverty, but more important, these cuts cripple the overall effort to help impoverished countries escape from the trap of poverty and disease.

If Bush really means what he says about battling AIDS, he will support the full \$3 billion that has been authorized for spending on AIDS in the 2004 budget, with at least \$1 billion of that going to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB, and Malaria. Otherwise his trip could be a cruel illusion, heaping US "spin" on top of Africa's massive suffering.

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