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Rich must keep aid promises, says UN

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More than 500 million people can escape poverty and tens of millions can avoid otherwise certain death if the United States, Japan and other rich nations keep their promises to vastly increase development aid over the next decade, a report said yesterday.

A redoubling of effort by poor countries is also required if the world is to meet the internationally agreed goals of halving world poverty, hunger and illness by 2015.

The report, from the UN Millennium Project and compiled by Harvard professor Jeffrey Sachs with United Nations development chief Mark Malloch Brown, was officially presented to UN secretary-general Kofi Annan yesterday.

The 3,000-page report, *Investing in Development*, says that the goals, set five years ago, were still achievable, but only if all parties fulfilled their promises.

"The costs of undertaking this on a global scale are well within the bounds of what has long been promised by the rich world but not yet delivered," said Mr Sachs. He praised the energy of Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, who are pushing for a Marshall plan for Africa, but the report notes that Britain's overseas aid budget is still only at half the 0.7% of gross domestic product agreed internationally years ago.

Charity and development groups welcomed the call for an increase in aid from rich countries but criticised the study for not being bold enough in its ambitions.

"Unfortunately it is still trumpeting the development model of 25 years ago even though it has not worked," said Steve Tibbett, ActionAid UK head of policy and campaigns.

He added that while the British government was giving leadership on getting a better deal for poor countries, its record to date on providing aid was less than commendable.

"The UK government talks the talk on international development but this report shows that they've yet to walk the walk. It's going to be difficult for the UK's leaders to credibly press for more and better aid, debt cancellation and trade justice at the forth coming G8 summit when they continue to fall short in their own development efforts".

The report identifies a number of quick-fix solutions, such as the mass distribution of free mosquito nets to malaria-infested countries in Africa, which could easily be launched this year to start the "scaling up" of development projects and financing.

It also calls on poor countries to have workable poverty reduction strategies in place by 2006 at the latest.

The report, which will be presented to the UN General Assembly in September, is designed to feed into a renewed push on development and poverty reduction by the Group of Eight leading industrial countries this year, being pushed by the British government as it chairs the G8 this year and holds the rotating presidency of the European Union.

Mr Brown yesterday met the Commission for Africa in South Africa at the end of a week-long tour of the continent.

The report lists 10 key recommendations for action, one of which is that rich countries increase their overseas development aid to 0.7% of GDP by 2015 from an average of 0.25% today.

Only a handful of countries such as Denmark and the Netherlands have achieved the 0.7% target although Britain, Belgium, France, Finland and Ireland have pledged to do so. The United States and Japan - the world's two largest economies - only spend 0.15% and 0.2% respectively on aid.

The report recommended that donors should identify at least a dozen "fast-track" countries for a rapid scaling up of development aid this year because many were in a position to put the money straight to work in things like abolishing fees for primary schools and basic healthcare, the distribution of antiretroviral drugs to treat HIV/Aids and mosquito nets.

"We are not talking about writing a blank cheque - mosquito nets do not disappear into Swiss bank accounts," said Mr Sachs.

He said the report was not about handing cash out to people in poor countries, but helping the world's poorest.

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