

UN outlines strategy to fight global disease

Poverty-related deaths are main target

By Nick Cumming-Bruce

BANGKOK: Preventable poverty-related diseases kill as many people as Asia's tsunami disaster every five days, a death toll equivalent to 68 Asian tsunamis every year, according to a report Monday by the United Nations for the launching of a global strategy to combat poverty, its priority in 2005.

The strategy, set out by the UN Millennium Project, an independent advisory group directed by the economist Jeffrey Sachs, says that the Millennium Development Goals adopted by UN member countries in 2000 with the aim of cutting world poverty by half in the next decade are "utterly affordable" with aid amounting to one-half of 1 percent of the incomes of developed countries. However, without urgent action in 2005, many countries that could achieve the goals "will be consigned to failure," the report says.

Such failure could also add to the risk of conflict, the report warns. Achieving the Millennium Development Goals is not just a matter of human rights and justice but also "vital to international and national security and stability," it says. It urges that the Millennium Development goals be "placed centrally in international efforts to end violence, conflict, instability and terrorism."

The report comes at a point when international aid agencies are still assessing the blow that the tsunami disaster of Dec. 26 has dealt to poverty reduction efforts around the region. The devastation inflicted by waves has pushed millions of people deeper into poverty, destroyed jobs and livelihoods, disrupted education systems in some areas and caused environmental damage that will take years to recover, UN officials note.

They express concern that the huge sums governments pledged in relief to Asian tsunami victims will be taken from existing aid budgets and will affect poverty reduction programs in other developing countries.

At the same time, the UN has gone out of its way to harness international sympathy and support for victims of the tsunami to the longer-term battle against such equally potent killers as hunger and disease. Half a million women die every year giving birth, the equivalent of an Asian tsunami every four months, the UN points out. Two to three million people die annually of malaria, equivalent to at least 12 tsunamis a year, and three million people die each year from the AIDS virus, equivalent to an Asian tsunami every three weeks.

"Investing in Development," described as the first detailed costing exer-

cise of its kind, says that effective remedies require both a big increase in the funds that developing countries raise from their own resources and a rise in official development assistance from \$135 billion in 2006, equivalent to 0.44 percent of donor countries' gross national product, to \$195 billion in 2015, or 0.54 percent of their gross national product.

Another possible source of funding could be savings achieved by avoiding excessive consumption in the developed world, Lee Yee-Cheong, a co-author of the report and coordinator of a task force on science, technology and innovation. Europe spends more on ice cream than the estimated cost of providing basic water and sanitation worldwide, he notes.

But the Millennium Project report, presenting itself as "a practical plan to achieve the Millennium Development Goals," emphasizes the need for better quality in how aid is delivered and used. The quality of official aid "is often very low" and inconsistent with trade policies and has fostered the misperception that aid does not work, threatening public support for development assistance, it notes.

Multilateral agencies do not coordinate their aid and have not encouraged developing countries to take the Millennium Development Goals seriously. Aid strategies need to be much more focused around the goals, it says.

Similarly the report identifies poor governance among developing countries, marked by corruption and poor policy choices, as a major reason why they are failing to achieve poverty reduction goals.

The report suggests several countries could be given "fast track" status and earmarked for sharp increases in development assistance if they qualify for debt relief under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries initiative or meet governance criteria applied by such organizations as the U.S. Millennium Challenge Corporation, the African Peer Review Mechanism or the World Bank-IMF joint staff assessments.

In the meantime, developed and developing countries should launch in 2005 a group of what the report calls "Quick Win actions" that can save or improve millions of lives; such measures range from school meals, malaria-control measures such as distributing bed nets, and antiretroviral AIDS drugs.

"We are in a position to end extreme poverty within our generation," Sachs said in comments prepared for the report's release. "Not just cutting poverty in half — if we want to eliminate extreme poverty, we can do that by 2025."

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