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UN scheme 'could lift over 500m people out of poverty'

By Evelyn Leopold

MORE than 500 million people can be lifted out of abject poverty, 250 million people will no longer go to bed hungry and 30 million children can be saved if rich countries double development aid over the next 10 years, a new United Nations sponsored report said yesterday.

In a 3,000-word report, some 265 experts came up with long-term projects and quick fixes, such as supplying mosquito bed nets against malaria to creating free school lunch programmes - to meet global goals of alleviating poverty and preventing disease that nations promised at a UN summit in 2000.

Poor nations were to reorder priorities, such as eliminating school fees and drawing up realistic development plans, and rich nations were to step up funds for specific projects, forgive debts and promote trade. But few have lived up to their commitments.

"The system is not working right now - let's be clear," said Jeffrey Sachs, a Columbia University professor and lead author of the report, commissioned by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. "It has taken too long to figure out an approach that will work. It's now a question of life and death."

The report, Investing in Development, was presented to Mr Annan yesterday, and will go to the G8 meeting in July and to world leaders in September at the UN General Assembly, which is expected to set a global development agenda.

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It proposed deadlines for specific projects and asks developing nations to present strategies by 2006 that would increase public investments for health and education and promote the private sector. Rich and poor countries alike should participate in "quick win" projects, such as mosquito nets or providing retroviral drugs to three million AIDS victims by 2005, giving farmers soil nutrients, eliminating school fees and uniforms and providing free schools lunches, among others.

Among industrial nations, only Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands and Luxembourg have spent more than the long-established world target of 0.7% of their gross national product. Britain, Belgium, France, Finland and Ireland have made promises to reach the target before 2015.

The United States, with its \$12 trillion economy, contributes the least development aid among 22 industrial nations with some 0.15%, followed by Italy at 0.17%, and Japan at 0.20%. The report says high-income nations should increase development aid from 0.25% of their GNP in 2003 to 0.44% in 2006 and reach the 0.7% by 2015.

"We have the world's eyes focused on the tsunami of the Indian Ocean," said Mr Sachs. "But the world continues to overlook the silent tsunamis of deaths from malaria which take every month the number of people that died in the Asian tragedy."

The report says there are anywhere from a dozen to three dozen nations in Africa and Asia that could be put on a fast-track for aid immediately.

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