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Malawi: MDGs Can Be Achieved, UN Envoy

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Despite widespread poverty and recurring food shortages, Malawi can still achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), according to Prof Jeffrey Sachs, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Special Advisor on the MDGs.

Sachs, who arrived in the country this weekend, told IRIN the purpose of his visit to was "to talk to donors so that they increase aid to Malawi".

About 65 percent of the 12 million people live below the poverty line and the country has experienced widespread crop failures that could see the number of those in need of food aid rising to about 4 million this year.

"The financial support that the country gets is not enough to sustain itself - Malawi has 85 percent of its people relying on farming activities, and these farmers do not have farm inputs ... to improve their harvests," he noted.

Although the government had announced a fertiliser subsidy, there was no guarantee that every farmer would be able to access it.

"I would have loved it if the poorest people were given free farm inputs, and donors increased their aid to Malawi. This, I believe, would be the only way for the country to achieve the MDGs," Sachs said.

"I do not think the level of aid to Malawi is sufficient, or that the programmes the government implements are sufficient to meet these challenges, but there is still time to do more," he added.

One of the main aims of the MDGs is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by halving the number of people who live on less than US \$1 a day by 2015.

"I am also very sympathetic to the government - much of its resources are spent servicing its debts while the poor are dying. I would like to see donors cancelling 100 percent of the country's debts, so that the money can be used to finance development programmes," Sachs commented.

Although rich countries had been urged to contribute to the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis (TB) and Malaria, Sachs observed that "the amount of money contributed to the Fund has not been sufficient".

According to UN estimates, \$8 billion was needed to efficiently combat HIV/AIDS, which was expected to increase to \$15 billion by 2007.

"So far the Fund has received pledges for only one-tenth of the amount required. I would love it if more money were given to the Fund, so that countries such as Malawi would be able to fight diseases such as malaria, TB and HIV/AIDS," Sachs said.

He was scheduled to meet President Bingu wa Mutharika and major donors before leaving on Tuesday.

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