

February 27, 2005

EDITORIAL

Thousands Died in Africa Yesterday

When a once-in-a-century natural disaster swept away the lives of more than 100,000 poor Asians last December, the developed world opened its hearts and its checkbooks. Yet when it comes to Africa, where hundreds of thousands of poor men, women and children die needlessly each year from preventable diseases, or unnatural disasters like civil wars, much of the developed world seems to have a heart of stone.

•

Not every African state is failing. Most are not. But the continent's most troubled regions - including Somalia and Sudan in the east, Congo in the center, Zimbabwe in the south and Ivory Coast, Liberia and Sierra Leone in the west - challenge not only our common humanity, but global security as well. The lethal combination of corrupt or destructive leaders, porous and unmonitored borders and rootless or hopeless young men has made some of these regions incubators of international terrorism and contagious diseases like AIDS. Others are sanctuaries for swindlers and drug traffickers whose victims can be found throughout the world.

In many of these places, poverty and unemployment and the desperation they spawn leave young men vulnerable to the lure of terrorist organizations, which, beyond offering two meals a day, also provide a target to vent their anger at rich societies, which they are led to believe view them with condescension and treat them with contempt. Training camps for Islamic extremists are now thought to be sprouting like anthills on the savanna.

"America is committed not only to the campaign against terrorism in a military sense, but the campaign against poverty, the campaign against illiteracy and ignorance." Former Secretary of State Colin Powell said that. Well, America launched its war on terror after Sept. 11, but did not bother to look at some of the deeper causes of global instability. This country is going to spend more than \$400 billion on the military this year, and another \$100 billion or so for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. But that amount is never going to buy Americans peace if the government continues to spend an anemic \$16 billion - the Pentagon budget is 25 times that size - in foreign aid that addresses the plight of the poorest of the world's poor.

•

For decades, most Americans either have preferred not to hear about these problems, or, blanching at the scope of the human tragedy, have thrown up their hands. But in terms of the kind of money the West thinks nothing of spending, on such things as sports and entertainment extravaganzas, not to speak of defense budgets, meeting many of Africa's most urgent needs seems shockingly affordable. What has been missing is the political will.

This year, there is a real chance of scrounging up, and then mobilizing, this political will. Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, who has stood resolutely by President Bush at Mr. Blair's own political peril through the war in Iraq, has staked Britain's presidency of the Group of 8 industrial nations this year on tackling poverty in Africa. Mr. Blair wants his ally, Mr. Bush, to stand beside him at the coming G-8 summit meeting at Gleneagles in Scotland this July. After the G-8 meeting there will be a United Nations summit meeting in New York in September, where the world's leaders will examine progress made toward reaching the Millennium Development Goals of cutting global poverty in half by 2015. Chief among those goals was that developed countries like America, Britain and France would work toward giving 0.7 percent of their national incomes for development aid for poor countries.

If the progress made so far is any guide, it is going to be a short meeting. While Britain is about halfway to the goal, at 0.34 percent, and France is at 0.41 percent, America remains near rock bottom, at 0.18 percent. Undoubtedly, President Bush will point to his Millennium Challenge Account when he attends the summit meeting. He will be correct in saying that his administration has given more annually in foreign aid than the Clinton administration in sheer dollars. His Millennium Challenge Account was supposed to increase United States assistance to poor countries that are committed to policies promoting development. This is a worthy endeavor, but it has three big problems.

•

First, neither the administration nor Congress has come anywhere close to financing the program fully. Second, the program, announced back in 2002, has yet to disburse a single dollar.

Most important, relying mostly on programs like the Millennium Challenge Account, which tie foreign aid to good governance, condemns millions of Africans who have dreadful governments (Liberia, Congo, Ivory Coast) or no government (Somalia) to die. No donor nation is,

or should be, willing to direct money to despotic, thieving or incompetent governments likely to misspend it or divert it to the personal bank accounts of their leaders. Strict international criteria of political accountability, financial transparency and development-friendly social and economic policies need to be established and enforced, not just by outside donors but by prominent and influential African leaders, like South Africa's president, Thabo Mbeki.

Help for people living under governments that fail these criteria will have to be channeled mainly through international and nongovernmental organizations. Bypassed governments will not like this, but they cannot be allowed to stand in the way of outside help to the victims of their misrule. It is not the fault of Africa's millions of refugees that warring armies have burned their villages and fields and driven them into unsafe and disease-ridden camps, like those in the Darfur region of Sudan. And no fair-minded person would blame the victims of callous and destructive governments, like Zimbabwe's, for the economic and social misery they create.

In the next few months, Mr. Bush could take a giant step towards altering the way the world views America by joining Mr. Blair in pushing for more help in Africa. It's past time; the continent is dying. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is anything but, some 1,000 people die every day of preventable diseases like malaria and diarrhea. That's the equivalent of a tsunami every five months, in that one country alone. Throughout the continent of Africa, thousands of people die needlessly every day from diseases like AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

•

One hundred years ago, before we had the medical know-how to eradicate these illnesses, this might have been acceptable. But we are the first generation able to afford to end poverty and the diseases it spawns. It's past time we step up to the plate. We are all responsible for choosing to view the tsunami victims in Southeast Asia as more deserving of our help than the malaria victims in Africa. Jeffrey Sachs, the economist who heads the United Nations' Millennium Development Project to end global poverty, rightly takes issue with the press in his book "The End of Poverty": "Every morning," Mr. Sachs writes, "our newspapers could report, 'More than 20,000 people perished yesterday of extreme poverty.'"

So, on this page, we'd like to make a first step.

Yesterday, more than 20,000 people perished of extreme poverty.