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UN unveils action plan to save millions of lives

18.01.05 1.00pm

NEW YORK - More than 500 million people can escape 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 to US\$195 billion (\$283.67 billion), a new UN-sponsored report said on Monday.

The 3000-word plan written by 265 experts says the money should be spent on both long-term projects and quick fixes, such as supplying mosquito bed nets and creating free school lunch programmes. These would enable countries to meet global goals to combat poverty, hunger and disease that all nations promised at a UN summit in 2000.

"The goals are not utopian. They are eminently achievable," said UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in accepting the report from Jeffrey Sachs, a Columbia University professor and lead author of the survey, labelled as the most comprehensive ever on global poverty.

The Millennium Development Goals, agreed on by all nations in 2000, include halving extreme poverty and hunger for at least 1 billion people living on US\$1 a day, reversing the spread of Aids and malaria and providing basic education by 2015.

The new report lays out plans for achieving those goals by setting deadlines for specific, often simple, projects that experts say have been proven to work, rather than just calling for scatter-shot aid. They include providing fertiliser for farmers, fixing roads or eliminating school fees as well as opening markets to goods from poor countries.

"The system is not working right now," Sachs said. "It has taken too long to figure out an approach that will work."

The report, "Investing in Development," commissioned by Annan, is to be presented to the Group of Eight countries meeting in July and to world leaders in September at the UN General Assembly, which is expected to set a global development agenda.

Government aid from rich countries should amount to US\$135 billion in 2003, rising to US\$195 billion in 2015 or about 0.54 per cent of these nations' GNP, about twice the current level to reach the Millennium goals, the report said. World leaders have agreed on 0.7 per cent of GNP for development aid for the Millennium goals and other projects.

However, the United States with its US\$12 trillion economy would have to raise its contributions considerably.

Although the United States is the largest donor in the world, it contributes the smallest proportion of its GNP to development aid among 22 industrial nations.

Washington spends some 0.16 per cent or US\$25 billion and to reach a target of 0.7 per cent of its GNP, it would have to spend US\$80 billion.

Japan, the world's second largest economy, is also low at 0.20 per cent as is Italy at 0.17 per cent, and Germany at 0.27.

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

"We are not asking for one new promise from any country in the world, only to follow through on what has already been committed," Sachs told a news conference.

"We have the world's eyes focused on the tsunami of the Indian Ocean," he said. "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."

Mosquito bed nets, for example, are cheap and could be distributed easily to save children from dying of malaria. "There is no black market for mosquito nets," Sachs said, acknowledging that many nations feared corruption.

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.

However, for nations like Belarus, Myanmar, North Korea and Zimbabwe, whose political leaders are widely criticised, "there is little case of large scale aid," the report said.

Aid should be channelled through humanitarian groups, who can monitor progress on the ground.

Middle-income developing nations, like China, Brazil, Mexico, Malaysia and South Africa, can afford the programmes.

Former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, a contributor to the report, said Latin America whose growth had slowed over the past 30 years still needed to reorder his priorities to wipe out deep pockets of poverty in many nations.

- REUTERS



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