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Guest columnists

Lifting millions of people out of grinding poverty

By John Shalikashvili and Bill Clapp

Special to The Times

We are at a critical point in our history, where for the first time the necessary elements are in place to dramatically reduce — if not completely eliminate — extreme global poverty, the condition of 1 billion people living on less than \$1 a day.

The recommendations of the recent United Nations report, "Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals," are to be applauded. These include doubling the financial assistance that wealthy nations contribute to developing countries, and focusing on those countries that are well governed and able to handle larger amounts of assistance.

Early initiatives, dubbed "quick wins," will have an immediate and broad impact in improving people's lives through such measures as the distribution of bed nets to combat malaria, the elimination of fees for primary education, and expanded treatment for those suffering from HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis.

Industrial nations have the resources to achieve the U.N. target of seven-tenths of 1 percent of national income dedicated to development assistance. While the United States is still far from this goal, five nations have now achieved it and another six have outlined specific timetables for reaching the target.

For far less than the cost of the Marshall Plan, which rebuilt Europe after World War II, donor nations could lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty and prevent tens of millions of unnecessary deaths.

There are now large numbers of developing countries with responsible and transparent governments committed to improving the living standards of their citizens. The U.N. report and President Bush's Millennium Challenge Account require that local governments devise their own development plans, in broad collaboration with their own civil societies, so we can ensure strong development partnerships with the countries receiving our assistance and increased accountability for our investments.

Finally, several decades of development work in the field have yielded broad consensus as to what programs are the most effective:

- Investing in people, through education, health care and expanded economic opportunity;
- Investing in governments, through capacity building, establishment of rule of law and development of local technical expertise;
- Making the global trading system work for poor countries, by opening industrialized markets to their goods and removing the agricultural subsidies that wealthy governments pay to their own producers; and
- Promoting public-private partnerships to harness the innovation and expertise of the business sector in supporting the world's development goals.

We firmly believe that the recent tsunami tragedy in Southeast Asia has galvanized our country in support of the world's poorest people and made a strong case for investments in critical infrastructure in developing countries so as to mitigate the disastrous impact of future natural catastrophes.

As devastating as the upheaval in Asia has been, Jeffrey Sachs, author of the U.N. report, rightly has pointed out that we face a continuing "silent tsunami" of poverty and disease that is claiming millions of lives each month.

We hope that 2005 will be the turning point for the world's poor and that the leaders of the industrialized world will meet the challenge of supporting developing countries as they work to lift their own people out of poverty. The reasons for doing so are compelling. There are no excuses.

Retired Army Gen. John Shalikashvili is former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Bill Clapp is chairman and CEO of Global Partnerships. This commentary was co-signed by former Washington Gov. Daniel J. Evans, foundation executive William H. Gates Sr., and former Environmental Protection Agency administrator William Ruckelshaus. All five are founders of the Initiative for Global Development.

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