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UN: Rich countries must double aid to impact poverty fight

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Global poverty can be cut in half by 2015 and eliminated by 2025 if the world's richest countries including the United States, Japan and Germany more than double aid to the poorest countries, hundreds of development experts concluded in a report Monday.

At stake is life or death for tens of millions of impoverished people, it said.

The report spells out the investments needed to meet the U.N. goals adopted by world leaders at the Millennium Summit in 2000 to tackle poverty, hunger and disease and promote education and development, mainly in African and Asian countries.

"What we're proposing is a strategy of investment to help empower the lives of very poor people that lack the tools and sometimes even the basic means to stay alive, much less be productive members of a fast-paced world economy," said Professor Jeffrey Sachs, head of the U.N. anti-poverty effort and lead author of the report.

The investments range from schools, clinics, safe water and sanitation to fertilizer, roads, electricity and transport to get goods to market.

"The system is not working right now — let's be clear," he said. "There's a tremendous imbalance of focus on the issues of war and peace, and less on the dying and suffering of the poor who have no voice."

According to the report, one billion people live on a dollar a day or less, many of them going to bed hungry every night; life expectancy in the poorest countries is half that in high-income countries. And every month, for example, 150,000 African children die of malaria because they don't have bed nets to keep out mosquitoes, a tragedy Sachs called the "silent tsunami."

In 1970, the world's nations agreed to provide 0.7% of their gross national income for development assistance, and that figure was reaffirmed by the U.N. conference on financing development in Monterey, Mexico, in 2002.

So far, only five countries have met or surpassed the target — Denmark, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. Six others have made commitments to reach the target by 2015 — Belgium, Finland, France, Ireland, Spain and Britain.

But 11 of the 22 richest donors according to the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development are far from the target and have not set timetables to reach it — including the United States, Japan and Germany.

If all 22 rich countries come up with the money, more than 500 million people can escape poverty and tens of millions can avoid certain death in the next decade, the report said.

If the countries kept up the 0.7% level of aid-giving for another decade, it said, "by 2025 extreme poverty can be substantially eliminated" for the remaining 500 million people surviving on a dollar a day.

"Our generation for the first time in human history really could see to it that extreme poverty on the planet is ended, not just by half but ended by the year 2025," Sachs said.

"We are not asking for one new promise from any country in the world, only the follow-through on what has already been committed," he stressed.

But trying to get the United States and the other rich nations to double or triple the amount of development assistance they give is expected to be an uphill struggle — and the target of a major lobbying effort.

The resources to meet the U.N. goals are definitely within the means of the world's 22 richest nations, Sachs said.

"The required doubling of annual official development assistance to \$135 billion in 2006, rising to \$195 billion by 2015, pales beside the wealth of high income countries — and the world's military budget of \$900 billion a year," the report said.

The United States now spends only about 0.15% of its GDP on development aid, well below the 0.7% figure, Sachs said.

President Bush's administration has pledged \$22.3 billion in aid for 2006, or 0.18% of gross national income. If it were to meet the report's target for 2006, Washington would have to contribute more than double — \$54.5 billion.

Unless rich countries come up with the money, the report warned that the "already dwindling faith in international commitments to reduce poverty will likely vanish."

Former Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, who led the project's task force on trade, said "it is in the self-interest of rich countries to support poor countries' development" for their own security and for economic growth because new markets will

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Sachs presented the report, in 13 volumes totaling 3,000 pages, to Annan who called it an important contribution to the debate on meeting the U.N. goals, which he said "are eminently achievable." Annan said he will use the report to help prepare his own recommendations in March for world leaders who will attend a follow-up summit in September that will also tackle U.N. reform.

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