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Analysis

Aid to Poorest Nations Trails Global Goal

U.S. Is a Top Donor After Disasters but Lags on Development Assistance

By Robin Wright

Washington Post Staff Writer

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At the 2002 U.N. summit on global poverty in Mexico, President Bush endorsed the final "Monterrey Consensus" that urged rich countries to contribute 0.7 percent of their national income -- which for Americans works out to a little more than 70 cents per day per person -- to help poor countries develop. The resolution capped an international effort launched in 1969.

"We fight against poverty because hope is an answer to terrorism," Bush told the summit. "We fight against poverty because opportunity is a fundamental right to human dignity."

Yet three years later, the United States is still a long way from that goal, providing the smallest amount of development aid from the world's 22 wealthy nations -- approximately 15 cents per day per American, officials say, or less than \$55 per person annually for aid to help the rest of the world.

"It's the equivalent of going to Starbucks twice a month," said William Cline, a fellow at the Center for Global Development and the Institute for International Economics. "We give only half as much as other [rich] countries on average."

By contrast, many other wealthy nations give a far greater share of their money. While the United States contributes about 15 cents for every \$100 in gross national income, Norway gives 92 cents, Denmark 84 cents, tiny Luxembourg 81 cents and the Netherlands 80 cents, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

The gap underscores one of the most heated debates in foreign policy: How much aid to give and where resources should go -- for disasters or development. The issue came to a head after Asia's tsunami, when a U.N. official said some rich nations were "stingy."

In fact, the United States is usually one of the top donors when disaster strikes, as it was in helping Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. But it is the smallest contributor, proportionately, for development -- the very assistance most needed to help countries advance so they will be less susceptible to disasters, say aid specialists and foreign policy analysts.

"We get humanitarian assistance right. The U.S. government is a wonderful responder. What we have a problem doing -- and it's gotten worse -- is the middle- to long-term nation-building

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activities, or getting someone from misery to poverty and then from poverty to middle class," said Johanna Mendelson Forman, a former U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) official now at the U.N. Foundation.

One of the most telling examples was \$550 million in U.S. emergency relief in 2003 to ease one of Ethiopia's recurrent famines -- but only \$4 million in aid to help Ethiopia develop agriculture.

"Crops fail because investment in agriculture is basically nonexistent. We could make a modest investment and prevent that kind of disaster long term. We provide less than 10 cents per farmer and then we're surprised that famines keep coming. This is really penny wise but pound foolish," said Jeffrey Sachs, an economist and director of Columbia University's Earth Institute. Disasters ate up 40 percent of U.S. foreign development aid -- \$6.4 billion of the entire \$16 billion budget in 2003, the last recorded year. Meanwhile, the world's 49 poorest nations got only \$4.2 billion from the United States, USAID officials say.

U.S. officials now say that the president never promised to fulfill the goal set in Monterrey anytime soon -- or ever. The administration also now emphasizes trade and remittances by foreign workers in the United States back to their home countries as more important development aid. But those resources, say foreign policy analysts, often do not generate education, health care or infrastructure such as electricity, roads and irrigation for agriculture.

Reaching the goal of the Monterrey Consensus is unlikely because the United States lacks the political will and gives priority to domestic demands. "In Norway, with a population of less than 5 million, it's easier to get national consensus than it is in a large nation like our own. The traditional social liberalism in Sweden and Holland runs deep in political discourse, which has led them to adopt targets and commitments that are beyond us in the U.S., as we are a country which has a much greater diversity of political goals and priorities," said Emily Simmons, USAID's assistant administrator for economic growth, agriculture and trade.

Americans are also focused on development at home. Simmons added, "We still see ourselves as a developing country. Some people say: 'Why when we have so many needs should we spend money abroad. If we are to maintain our role in the world economy, we need to invest in ourselves.' "

Part of the problem for the Bush administration is also the growing number of crises. Natural disasters and emergencies, which usually take priority, have increased dramatically over the past four to five years, said a senior USAID official.

To promote political development, the United States last year introduced the \$1 billion Millennium Challenge Account for countries that Bush stipulated are "ruling justly, investing in their people, and encouraging economic freedom." But no money from the fund has been spent yet, USAID officials acknowledge. And foreign policy analysts say the challenge effectively excludes many countries that need development the most -- and are most vulnerable to disasters.

"It leaves out countries that have not reached a certain threshold. But if you don't invest in economic development, improved health care and good governance in the most troubled countries, you end up with failed states that could harbor terror groups," said David Phillips, deputy director of the Council on Foreign Relations' Center of Preventive Action.

Aid analysts also say that a significant chunk of development aid -- at least 20 percent -- goes to only four countries: Egypt, Pakistan,

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Jordan and Colombia. Although they are strategic partners in the war on terrorism, they are not in the bloc of poorest nations.

After Congress repeatedly cut back USAID budgets during the 1990s, USAID funding has almost doubled over the past five years, according to the State Department. And on USAID's 40th anniversary in 2001, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell told staffers the agency deserved more resources. "You get less than 1 percent of the federal budget. I wish you had 10 times that amount," he said.

For now, the U.S. aid budget's emphasis on disaster relief could slow the pace at which poor countries can grow and take care of themselves, analysts say. "Foreign aid helps build the capacity of governments to prepare for and mitigate the effects of natural disasters. It also strengthens civil society, which is thrust into the role as first responder during an emergency," Phillips said.

The Worldwatch Institute's "State of the World 2005" report issued last week warned about the dangers of not devoting more resources to development. "Poverty, disease and environmental decline are the true axis of evil," warned Worldwatch President Christopher Flavin. "Unless these threats are recognized and responded to, the world runs the risk of being blindsided by the new forces of instability, just as the United States was surprised by the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11."

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