

G8 dismiss the African catastrophe

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7 June 2003

French President Jacques Chirac had said that he intended to make the desperate situation facing Africa a key theme of the Evian G8 summit. Development agencies and aid charities lobbied hard for at least some indication of a joint effort by the world's developed countries to help alleviate the increasing poverty, indebtedness and disease facing Africa. They were bitterly disappointed. As a spokesman for Oxfam put it, "Not only are there no firm commitments, even their rhetoric is watered down compared with last year."

United States President George W. Bush deliberately upstaged the proposals on trade and aid to Africa that Chirac had hoped to make by announcing before the summit that America would spend \$15 billion over the next five years on HIV/AIDS. Then at the three-day summit, which Bush left early, Chirac and the other leaders were so concerned to give an appearance of post-Iraq unanimity that they allowed the US to block any movement over areas that affect the underdeveloped world.

The trade issues on which Chirac had specifically proposed action—agricultural protectionism by the West and access to cheap drugs for AIDS—were dropped.

The desperation of the aid agencies in having to cope with a worsening situation in Africa is revealed in a series of documents produced by charities and campaign groups in the run-up to the G8 summit. Pointing to the "Africa Action Plan" that was agreed last year, Actionaid give a detailed list to show that on aid, debt relief, HIV/AIDS, provision of clean water and trade protectionism, "there has been less action since last year's G8 summit than there was before."

Jubilee Debt Campaign that mounted the first demonstrations at the G8 in 1998 point out that the supposed debt reduction schemes introduced by the International Monetary Fund mean that "the majority of the world's poorest and most indebted people remain enslaved by debt, with no real hope under existing policies of being freed from indebtedness."

Perhaps the most graphic picture of the situation facing Africa was highlighted by pop singer Bob Geldolf's visit to Ethiopia in the week before the G8 summit. It is two decades after the last serious famine when Geldolf visited the country with the proceeds of his Live Aid charity. UNICEF persuaded him to return to help raise funds because up to 15 million people are facing another famine and the World Food Programme warns that it has only two thirds of the 619,000

tonnes it needs for its 2003 requirements. Geldolf had vowed never to return, but he said, "All the rains have failed. Already UNICEF estimates that there are 60,000 severely malnourished children. Kids are beginning to die now in substantial numbers."

In his interview in the *Independent*, Geldolf outlined the features of the catastrophic situation: "the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse galloping across the plains of Ethiopia—and they are Famine, Debt, Trade and AIDS."

Geldolf explained that after the Cold War the West no longer needed to finance dictatorships: "we wanted that money back and the issue of debt came to the fore. Huge numbers of disempowered, disenfranchised, voiceless people were suddenly asked for money they didn't have."

Ethiopia, like most African regimes, has such high debt repayments that it cannot afford to provide basic health care.

Geldolf toured the southern province of Sidamo in Ethiopia, once a relatively prosperous region producing the country's main cash crop, coffee. During previous famines the area was rich enough to buy in food and survive. But over the past four years the price of coffee has fallen by 70 percent so that in the current famine the population is facing starvation.

The protectionism practised by the West has left African countries economically powerless. Tariffs are imposed on coffee—with tariffs increasing at every stage in processing—so it was impossible for Africa to do anything but export the raw beans and suffer the collapse in prices imposed by Western corporations.

Ethiopia is not regarded as an African country with a serious AIDS problem. But Geldolf visited a hospital at Dilla in the southern region. "It was one shitty little hospital to deal with a million people in the area," he explained. "There was one doctor there—a brilliant man—who had started doing random HIV tests. He's discovered that 14 percent of the population is positive—double the official estimate."

It was presumably after witnessing firsthand the impact of AIDS in Ethiopia that Geldolf made his much publicised praise for the Bush AIDS initiative, thinking that this was at least a step forward in dealing with the pandemic that kills 6,500 people each day in Africa and a means of shaming the European powers into giving more funds.

Closer examination reveals this not to be the case.

Bush's \$15 billion AIDS fund was originally announced four

months ago [See “Bush uses AIDS funding as an instrument of foreign policy” <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2003/feb2003/aids-f18.shtml>] and has just been passed by Congress. As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, the \$15 billion figure is spread over five years and next year only at most \$2 billion will be made available. Although the law sets out a \$3 billion a year provision the actual amount is subject to squeezes in aid budgets and will almost certainly be less. At the same time the White House has recommended cuts in other areas of US foreign aid spending—the US is already one of the lowest aid providers of all developed countries, donating only 0.12 percent of national income.

As AIDS campaigners have pointed out, a major beneficiary of the US initiative will be the American pharmaceutical industry. The US is blocking any trade deal that allows generic anti-AIDS drugs, costing a tenth or less of the drugs produced by the major corporations, to be widely sold in Africa and the underdeveloped countries. This initiative will enable the drug companies to continue selling at inflated prices.

Only \$200 million from the total of Bush’s AIDS funding next year will go to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria that was set up through the United Nations in 2001. This is a mere 5 percent of the minimum needed by the Global Fund. Campaigners such as Global AIDS Alliance warn that the fund now faces a financial crisis and will be unable to meet even the limited commitments already made.

Most of the new US money will go to US bodies such as USAID and the Centers for Disease Control. They have no experience in dealing with HIV/AIDS in underdeveloped countries, but give a cover for US interventions. The real purpose of Bush’s AIDS proposal is certainly not a genuine humanitarian concern to tackle the AIDS pandemic. Instead the US funding will be targeted at a limited number of African countries where it can be used to boost US strategic interests.

One of the countries on the US list is Ethiopia, whose government has offered its services in the “war against terrorism”. Ethiopia backs various local warlords in Somalia and claims to be fighting the alleged influence of armed Islamic groups in the Horn of Africa. For this reason it has been viewed favourably by the US and Britain as a bulwark against the influence of Arab regimes in the region.

Another aspect of Bush’s AIDS fund not mentioned by Geldolf is the insistence that a third of it is used to support campaigns for sexual abstinence outside marriage. This sop to the Christian right, in addition to being an infringement of basic rights, is known to have no impact at all as a public health measure.

Also demanded by the religious right is the stipulation that no funding goes to groups working with prostitutes and the inclusion of a provision that allows religious organisations to vet the anti-AIDS measures used by NGOs funded by the US.

Because the situation in Africa has deteriorated so markedly

over the last few years, and because the lobbying by NGOs have had virtually no effect, campaigners like Bob Geldolf have tended to welcome any apparent step forward, such as Bush’s AIDS package.

In a similar vein other aid organisations, whilst criticising the US, have welcomed the French and British initiatives in Africa. France increased its aid payments by 15 percent in 2002 and Britain promised to increase aid from \$5.4 billion a year to \$7.8 billion a year by 2006. This reverses the downward trend in aid throughout the last decade.

President Chirac’s proposal to lift trade restrictions on African agriculture will presumably be put to the European Union even though they were dropped at the G8. Radical campaigner George Monbiot wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper in support of Chirac’s “unprecedented” initiative and attacked British Prime Minister Tony Blair for not supporting him against Bush at the Evian summit.

In fact just as with the US AIDS funding, Britain and France’s concern is to promote their interests in Africa. Leaked documents from the World Trade Organisation’s negotiations made available by campaigning groups earlier this year showed what is behind the agendas of France, Britain and the EU. They are just as committed to free market attacks on working people and the poor as the US.

Trade concessions will be linked to economies opening up to European companies and banks. As the World Development Movement explained: “Now we can see that the EU is aiming for a global takeover of essential services and the financial infrastructure of developing countries for the benefit of EU corporations. We can point to specific examples of countries where they are targeting [state-owned] working alternatives to the free market. The EU has been through their economies with a fine tooth comb. The lie that this is a trade agenda for development has been finally exposed.”



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