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U.N. Panel Urges Doubling of Aid to Cut Poverty

By CELIA W. DUGGER

UNITED NATIONS, Jan. 17 - An international team sponsored by the United Nations proposed a detailed, ambitious plan on Monday that it says could halve extreme poverty and save the lives of millions of children and hundreds of thousands of mothers each year by 2015.

The report says drastically reducing poverty in its many guises - hunger, illiteracy, disease - is "utterly affordable." To fulfill this goal, industrial nations would need to double aid to poor countries, to one-half of 1 percent of national incomes, from one-quarter of 1 percent.

"We're talking about rich countries committing 50 cents out of every $100 of income to help the poorest people in the world get a foothold on the ladder of development," said Prof. Jeffrey D. Sachs of Columbia University, who was appointed by Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2002 to head what is being called the United Nations Millennium Project.

The report advocates reforms to ease trade barriers and sweeping investments in health, education, rural development, road building, housing and scientific research.

The blueprint won quick praise from the heads of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. But its approach was viewed by some critics as utopian overreaching. At least one economist involved, Nancy Birdsall, president of the Center for Global Development in Washington, said she worried that it put too little emphasis on the need for poor countries to make deep political and social changes to reduce poverty.

The project's recommendations arrive as momentum is building among rich nations to ratchet up spending to improve the lot of the world's poor, a trend influenced by post-9/11 concerns that impoverished nations like Afghanistan and Sudan can be incubators of terrorism and conflict.

Several donor nations have recently pledged to increase aid to the poor dramatically in coming years, and a spate of reports and high-level meetings this year will draw further attention to the topic.

The worldwide outpouring of grief and aid since the tsunami in South Asia killed more than 150,000 people has stirred hope here that the same wellspring can be tapped for what Professor Sachs called a "silent tsunami" of global poverty that kills more than 150,000 children every month from malaria alone.

The project's agenda is the first in a series this year intended to refocus attention on fulfilling promises to fight poverty that were made at the United Nations in 2000. There, world leaders unanimously agreed to institute universal primary education, promote sex equality and achieve sharp reductions in hunger, and in the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day, by 2015. A main focus is also on slashing the millions of preventable deaths among mothers and children.

Britain, in particular, has recently seized the leadership on these issues. In July, it will hold a summit meeting of industrial countries that will spotlight poverty, particularly in Africa. Prime Minister Tony Blair has appointed a commission on Africa that is to report this spring, and the chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown, is campaigning for a "Marshall Plan" for Africa that includes debt relief and his own proposal to nearly double aid from rich nations.

Levels of aid are likely to be high on the agenda this year. In 2002 many world leaders, including President Bush, supported a declaration promising to "make concrete efforts" toward a target of providing seven-tenths of 1 percent of their national incomes for aid.

Five countries have achieved that goal: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Luxembourg. Britain, France, Finland, Spain, Ireland and Belgium have committed to reach that level on specific timetables. The United States government, which allocates less than two-tenths of 1 percent for aid, has not made a comparable pledge; the Bush administration has increased American aid by a half, to 15 hundredths of 1 percent from one-tenth of 1 percent, but it is still the smallest percentage among major donor countries.

In September, world leaders are to gather at the United Nations to take stock of progress toward their antipoverty goals. The new report, "Investing in Development: A Practical Plan to Achieve the Millennium Development Goals," says poor countries should stop tailoring their plans to combat poverty to the limited resources available and instead draw up comprehensive approaches, then figure the costs.

The project calls on poor countries to improve their own governance, uphold the rule of law and spend more of their own money to combat poverty. But economists on the team estimate that those resources will be inadequate and that donors will need to make up the difference.

"We are not telling countries what to do," said Professor Sachs said, who emphasized that many African leaders he had met with were pressing for the solutions proposed in the report.

The report advocates that rich countries support a crash development program this year in at least a dozen poor, well-governed nations that donors are confident would use the money wisely. Ghana, Mozambique, Mali, Senegal and Tanzania are among those most often mentioned.

It also recommends pressing this year for 17 "quick wins," policies that it says would swiftly translate into millions of improved lives. Among them are the mass distribution of insecticide-treated bed nets to combat malaria; elimination of fees for primary education to draw the poorest children to school; expansion of school meals programs to hungry areas; distribution of de-worming medicines to schoolchildren in affected areas, and expanded treatment of people with AIDS and tuberculosis.

The long list of "quick wins" and the scope of development challenges that the report advocates tackling simultaneously have led to internal debate among some experts.

Professor Sachs said many poor countries were ready to move forward on many fronts, especially with infusions of aid to improve their administrative and information systems. "The problem is not really the range of issues," he said, "but the lack of financing."

But Ms. Birdsall, a leader of the project's education task force, said she worried that the report did not emphasize enough the many difficult steps that poor countries will have to take that have nothing to do with money. And while she, too, strongly supports increased aid, she also said the report recommended too many priorities and "quick wins."

"Having so many unfortunately reflects the difficult reality of setting priorities, even for the authors of this report," she said. "We wanted a constraint-free world, but that's not the way life is or the development challenge. Even if the money is there, where do you start? What do you work on?"

The report bears the unmistakable stamp of Professor Sachs, an economist identified with his advocacy of "shock therapy," or a quick application of market-oriented policies in troubled economies. From 1991 to 1994 he was an economic adviser to the Russian government. But in recent years he has become known as a crusader for the idea that within a generation, rich and poor countries together can end the extreme poverty afflicting more than a billion people.

His advocacy for a wide-ranging set of prescriptions and sharp increases in aid have intensified the long smoldering debate about the efficacy of foreign aid for poor countries struggling with weak governance and corruption.

Prominent development experts who were not on the millennium team reacted to its report with comments that ranged from harshly critical to cautiously supportive.

William Easterly, an economics professor at New York University, said an incremental approach with more modest goals - for example, prevention of childhood deaths from measles through vaccination - would have been more effective than that of the report.

"Its approach is a sort of utopian central planning by global bureaucrats, a crash program like a Great Leap Forward for poor countries," he said. "This will not work any better than central planning by bureaucrats has worked anywhere else, which is to say not at all."

But Prof. Dani Rodrik, a Harvard University economist, said that while the plan required what he called "a huge leap of faith" that poor countries could handle sharply higher flows of aid, it was worth a gamble, especially because the increased amount of aid proposed is such a small share of rich countries' national incomes.

"It has the potential of making a difference in a number of countries that take this opportunity and put it to good use," he said. "One has to ask the question: If not this, what else?"