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Bush launches program to defeat malaria worldwide

By Ron Hutcheson

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WASHINGTON - More than 50 years after health workers eradicated malaria in the United States, the Bush administration is launching an ambitious new attack on a disease that still claims more than 1 million victims annually worldwide.

The goal of Thursday's White House Summit on Malaria is to rally the nation for a mammoth public-health campaign that would rival the effort that defeated polio in the 1960s. If all goes as planned, schoolchildren across America will join corporations, religious organizations, charities and the federal government in a mission to cut Africa's death rate from malaria in half within five years. Africa accounts for about 90 percent of malaria-related deaths worldwide, and 75 percent of the victims are children.

"We're actually trying to create the 21st-century version of the March of Dimes," said John Bridgeland of Malaria No More, one of the summit's sponsors. "The last generation wiped out smallpox and polio. This generation's cause celebre can be malaria."

The parasitic disease is spread by mosquitoes and typically causes high fevers, chills and flu-like symptoms. Death can result from severe anemia, kidney failure or malaria-related brain disease.

For most Americans, malaria is a relic of a bygone era, an ailment for jungle explorers and colonial adventurers. But it's still a deadly reality in Africa, where it kills more than 2,000 children every day.

"Our response so far as been just tiny compared to the problem," said Emmanuel d'Harcourt, a physician who oversees the African health programs operated by the International Rescue Committee, a relief group. "Sometimes the numbers work against us, because when you get to a million (deaths) you kind of forget what that means."

President Bush escalated the global campaign against malaria last year by pledging \$1.2 billion in U.S. aid over five years. He and first lady Laura Bush, who's made the issue one of her top priorities, are hosting Thursday's meeting to raise awareness of the problem and seek more financial help.

Pledges started arriving even before the meeting convened. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation said it would boost its anti-malaria spending by \$83.5 million, bringing its total commitment to nearly \$766 million. Melinda Gates, who'll speak at the summit, called malaria's

persistence "a moral outrage," especially since it's preventable and treatable.

"Every day, thousands of mothers watch helplessly as their children die from a disease that we have known how to prevent for decades," she said Monday in announcing the foundation's latest cash commitment. "We would not allow it here in the U.S., and we should not allow it anywhere."

Malaria No More, a network of charitable foundations, religious groups and international organizations, said it would announce plans at the meeting to send more than 100,000 volunteers to Africa to help prevent and treat the disease.

Before its U.S. eradication in 1951, malaria was such a problem in the Southeastern United States that the federal government established the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - then known as the Communicable Disease Center - in Atlanta to deal with it. Aggressive spraying for mosquitoes, combined with efforts to drain their breeding grounds, eliminated the disease.

In Africa, the war on mosquitoes is being supplemented by efforts to encourage the use of bed nets.

"A \$10 contribution can buy a bed net and save, on average, two to three lives. It protects the mother and the children who sleep under the net," Bridgeland said. "My kids could sign up their entire school and save a village."

Eradicating malaria in Africa is far more difficult than eliminating it in the United States. Sub-Saharan Africa is particularly well-suited environmentally for the most deadly form of the parasite and the mosquitoes that carry it. A lack of cooperation among national governments also makes it hard to defeat the disease.

"It's like breaking up a fistfight versus breaking up a full-scale war," d'Harcourt said. "It would require a lot of coordination between countries. You need to do it everywhere at once."

Bridgeland, a former head of the USA Freedom Corps, the domestic volunteer agency, said he was convinced that an outpouring of support could eliminate malaria worldwide.

"We're serious about making a private-sector commitment that can end this problem," he said. "If it succeeds, it will give Americans and people around the world confidence that we can work together, across party lines, to do big things and solve big problems."

For more information online about the anti-malaria campaign, the White House Summit on Malaria and how to help, go to www.malarianomore.org or www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/malaria