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Bush Celebrates Early Victories in Campaign Against Malaria

By CELIA W. DUGGER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 14 — Malaria, a deadly tropical disease long overshadowed by AIDS, shared the stage with the president and the first lady on Thursday when the Bushes were the hosts of a forum at the National Geographic Society to raise the profile of this neglected scourge.

The gathering highlighted the growing efforts of influential evangelical, business and charitable leaders to raise money and mobilize volunteers against malaria, which kills 800,000 African children each year. Their rallying cry: Donate \$10 for a mosquito net, save a life.

It also gave President Bush, whose reputation for compassionate conservatism has taken a beating during the grueling war in Iraq, a moment to bask in some of the early victories in the five-year, \$1.2 billion campaign against the disease that his administration undertook a year and a half ago.

For example, on one of the spice islands of Zanzibar, where the United States helped distribute mosquito nets to cover every slumbering pregnant woman and child younger than 5 years old, the number of malaria cases has plummeted almost 90 percent since last year.

“So we’re acting and we’re leading,” Mr. Bush said. “And with partners across the world we are helping the people of Africa turn the tide against malaria.”

Melinda Gates, who with her husband, Bill, has invested heavily in research for a malaria vaccine, told the Who’s Who of global malaria warriors packed into the auditorium that a decade ago, their number would have fit in a broom closet.

The top leaders of all the main malaria-fighting organizations — from the World Health Organization to the World Bank, from the United States Agency for International Development to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to Unicef — were at the forum, which the Bush administration titled the White House Summit on Malaria. They met for hours after the public session to plot strategy.

A Gallup poll that was done free for Malaria No More in recent days found that while 96 percent of Americans counted AIDS as a very serious problem in Africa, only two-thirds knew that malaria was also a grave threat.

Malaria No More, a nonprofit group of business and charitable groups that organized in response to a challenge from Mr. Bush, talked up its Web site, www.malarianomore.org, as a place where people can donate \$10 to provide a family with a mosquito net to prevent malaria, and the education to use it properly.

The big money, however, has come from big donors. The Global Fund has so far committed \$2.6 billion to malaria. The Gates Foundation has promised to spend \$766 million. The World Bank has approved \$357 million in loans.

The president's Malaria Initiative is supposed to gradually ramp up spending. But money for this year's programs in Uganda, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, Rwanda, Senegal and Malawi — \$135 million — is still uncertain. Whether it survives depends on collaboration between the administration and Democratic leaders in Congress.

Senator Patrick J. Leahy, a Vermont Democrat expected to lead the Senate appropriations subcommittee that oversees foreign aid, was at the forum and said he wanted to find a way to finance the administration's malaria program. "We're trying to get the kind of money we spend in a day in Iraq," he said. "Somewhere we've got to have our priorities right. It's a moral issue."