

## New Congress Can Save Lives, or Money

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The new Congress, led in the House by Speaker Nancy Pelosi, is about to make its first decision regarding how America's money should be spent - a decision that leaves millions of lives hanging in the balance. Congress's choice to bypass 2007 appropriations legislation and extend fiscal 2006 funding levels into the new year will mean, in effect, cuts of almost \$1 billion in funding for programs to combat AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. If not reversed, the lack of funds will force hundreds of thousands of people to forgo prevention, treatment, care and support for the three most deadly infectious diseases in the world.

Many of the people most affected by Congress's decision will be my fellow Africans. Around the world, the most poor and marginalized men, women and children will suffer the consequences of flat-lined funding. AIDS, TB and malaria are diseases of poverty; to truly address them, sufficient aid must be reliably and properly channeled in solidarity with the people who will receive it.

In bipartisan action last year, Congress approved as much as \$4.37 billion for programs to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria in 2007. This increase would have given much-needed hope and opportunity to those at risk of and suffering from these diseases. However, the joint funding resolution (or "continuing resolution") the new Congress is expected to pass would keep spending at 2006 levels, which would mean only \$3.43 billion for AIDS, TB and malaria efforts - \$940 million less. My heart aches to think of the lives that could be saved with nearly \$1 billion - but there is still time for Speaker Pelosi, a longtime leader in the fight against HIV-AIDS, to do something about it.

The U.S. government has repeatedly promised to combat HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria: At the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 and as a member of the Group of Eight the United States committed to the goal of universal access for HIV-AIDS prevention and treatment by 2010. However, the funding resolution Congress is considering would shortchange and potentially sabotage every American program to address these diseases, leaving innocent people in its wake.

The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), for example, is designed to have its funding increase each year in order to meet its goals.

If funding for 2007 is not increased from 2006 levels, it may be impossible for the United States to continue making headway on the human catastrophe that is HIV-AIDS. Staying at 2006 funding levels would result in a loss of up to \$700 million for the 15 PEPFAR focus countries. As a result, 280,000 fewer people will be put on AIDS treatment. That is

280,000 lives needlessly lost. In addition, 10 percent of all PEPFAR money goes to support orphans and other vulnerable children. Children depend upon us to protect them. But without enough money to continue expanding, PEPFAR will be another program that leaves behind a generation of kids.

Multilateral programs will suffer as well. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, a unique multilateral partnership based on the needs expressed by affected countries, stands to lose out on enough money for 555,000 HIV tests, 120,000 treatments for TB, and 945,000 bed nets to prevent malaria. That's more lives lost.

HIV-AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and the tens of thousands of orphaned and vulnerable children are symptoms of our collective failure to protect each other, to ensure that all people's basic needs and rights are met, and to guarantee everyone a life of dignity. This failure is very troubling to me.

It is a sign of our breakdown as one human family. Worldwide, we have made stops and starts at healing this rift and keeping our promises to one another. But if Congress does not act to restore that \$1 billion for global health, poverty alleviation and foreign aid, the rift will only grow wider and healing will be further beyond our reach.

The United States has the potential to be a global leader. Congress has the opportunity to remind the world of the good that can be done in the name of the American people, to help people around the world build better lives and restore our brotherhood and sisterhood. The promises made to poor countries are not just words on paper. They concern the lives of people who, in different circumstances, could be you or me.

As we honor the life and vision of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. today, I hope and pray that Congress will choose the righteous path, the path that will save tens of thousands of lives and give countless children opportunities and hope they have never before imagined. I join the world in watching, and waiting for its decision.

*The writer, an archbishop emeritus, is honorary chairperson of the Global AIDS Alliance.*