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Breaking New Ground? The President's AIDS Proposal

By Catherine Gordon

Ladies and Gentlemen, seldom has history offered a greater opportunity to do so much for so many. We have confronted, and will continue to confront, HIV/AIDS in our own country. And to meet a severe and urgent crisis abroad, tonight I propose the Emergency Plan for AIDS relief, a work of mercy beyond all current international efforts to help the people of Africa.

This comprehensive plan will prevent seven million new AIDS infections, treat at least two million people with life-extending drugs and provide humane care for millions of people suffering from AIDS and for children orphaned by AIDS.

—President Bush in his State of the Union speech, Jan. 28, 2003.

As the President made his historic pledge to provide sufficient funds to effectively battle the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa and the Caribbean, the virus continues to devastate entire populations and threatens to destabilize the continent of Africa. The Emergency Plan for AIDS relief is a much needed and appreciated step forward in fighting the pandemic but much more remains to be done. There are still many questions remaining about the President's plan.

The pandemic is worldwide: More than 22 million men, women, and children have died, and 42 million are now infected. Every day 15,000 new cases emerge and 8,200 people die of the disease. By 2010 more than 40 million children will be orphaned by AIDS.

The continent of Africa has been hit hardest by the AIDS pandemic. Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounts for 70 percent of the world's HIV/AIDS cases, with approximately 29.4 million people infected. HIV/AIDS has decreased average life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa from 62 years to 47 years – which was the U.S. life expectancy 100 years ago.

Women and children are most affected by the disease in sub-Saharan Africa. While HIV/AIDS in North America is more widespread among the male homosexual population, in Africa the disease largely strikes heterosexuals. It is made worse by the widespread discrimination and the social, economic, and political inequality suffered by women, which prevents them from protecting themselves against unwanted sex.

What is most disturbing about this pandemic is that HIV/AIDS is now a preventable and treatable disease, even in the poorest countries. It is a human rights imperative to make prevention, care, and treatment of the disease accessible to all those who need it. It is not a matter of charity. The President's

proposal is a huge step in the right direction, but public health experts are becoming increasingly concerned about the underlying structure of the plan. Public Health experts agree that in order to fight an epidemic such as this, a large investment must be made up front in order to pay for the building of health infrastructure. Once that infrastructure is built, the cost of fighting the epidemic will go down.

Funding for the President's new plan, however, comes too slowly, with only \$2 billion allocated for 2004. This is far short of the \$3.5 billion that is needed annually.

Another worry is over the funding of the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria. The Fund was created to fight the global HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria epidemics by sharing resources and expertise across national boundaries, as well as between the private and public sectors. It includes representatives of donor and recipient governments, NGOs, private companies and organizations, U.N. agencies, and people from the affected communities. The Fund supports locally determined priorities in the fight against these diseases.

In order to be successful in its work, the Global Fund needs a total of \$6.3 billion in new funding over the next two years. A fair U.S. share of this (based on GNP) would be 33 percent, or \$2.1 billion. Because only \$300 - \$400 million will be secured in 2003, the United States needs to contribute between \$1.7 - \$1.8 billion.

Unfortunately, the Administration is aggressively pressuring Senators from both political parties to cut funding allocated to the Fund from an authorization bill that is now before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Two markups of the bill have been cancelled due to disagreement over the proposed legislation.

The Administration wants the authorization bill to be consistent with the President's plan. This plan would reduce the authorization of overall AIDS spending from \$2.5 billion to \$2 billion, and would also reduce the contribution to the Fund to only \$200 million per year, far short of the \$1.7 - \$1.8 billion that is needed. The majority of funding would go toward U.S. government programs already in place at USAID and HHS. This has caused some concern as neither of these departments has a record of supporting treatment and care. Many at USAID—including its administrator—have held an anti-treatment position.

Last year Senators Frist (R-TN) and Kerry (D-MA) led a bipartisan fight to pass an authorization bill allocating \$1.25 billion toward the Global Fund in 2004. The bill passed by unanimous consent in the Senate but failed to pass the full Congress because of opposition from House Republicans. At the time of writing, Frist has now put his name behind a bill drafted by the White House that significantly weakens his earlier bill. It takes out all specific funding levels for AIDS programs named in the bill, removes mandates in the Senate-passed bill

by swapping the word “shall” for “should,” and removes all congressional oversight mechanisms. It also, as stated above, reduces the funding of the Global Fund to only \$200 million per year.