

Bush Plays Shell Game with African Lives

By Salih Booker

On the eve of a meeting of rich country leaders in Canada, President Bush has brought out a “new initiative” promising \$500 million to prevent transmission of HIV/AIDS from mothers to children. Intended to stave off the embarrassment of coming empty-handed to a summit trumpeted as focusing on Africa, the White House initiative is in fact a cynical move to derail more effective action against AIDS.

With a bipartisan congressional coalition poised to approve an additional \$500 million or more in AIDS funding for fiscal year 2002, President Bush first put the squeeze on Republican senators to cut the total back to \$200 million, half of which could go to the Global AIDS Fund and half for bilateral programs to cut mother-to-child transmission. Then he offered his plan, which claims the \$200 million as his own while only promising to ask Congress for another \$300 million two years from now. His plan would allow no additional money for the Global Fund.

The administration justifies the smaller amounts and the go-slow timetable by the need to first show “results.” But, with 8,000 people around the world dying of AIDS daily (some 6,000 of them in sub-Saharan Africa), the results of Bush’s stalling action are crystal-clear: more dead people.

Demonstrably successful anti-AIDS programs run by governments, nongovernmental organi-

zations, and mission hospitals are starved for funds. Fewer than 2% of AIDS sufferers in sub-Saharan Africa, including pregnant mothers, have access to anti-retroviral drugs that can save lives. The Global AIDS Fund, which is estimated to require some \$10 billion a year, is already out of funds less than halfway through its first year, while the U.S. has supplied less than a tenth of the \$3.5 billion a year that would be its fair share.

When the issue is saving African lives, the administration says “Let’s wait.” In contrast, there is no hesitation in shelling out more than \$5 billion a year in new subsidies for rich U.S. farmers, or more than \$6 billion a year to pay for suspending the estate taxes on the richest Americans.

President Bush has also recently announced a trip to Africa for next year and \$20 million a year for African education (beginning in 2004). But public relations gestures and budget shell games do not save lives. The American public—and Congress—need to tell the President to change course.

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