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NEWS ANALYSIS
By Pete Engardio

Bush Balks at Pact to Fight Poverty

The Administration wants out of a multinational agreement to spend at least 0.7% of U.S. GDP on development assistance for poor nations

In March, 2002, while the U.S. was still fighting in Afghanistan and gearing up for its other wars, President George W. Bush made a grand gesture at a United Nations-organized summit in Monterrey, Mexico, that surprised many of the Administration's critics. Bush pledged to boost U.S. development assistance to the world's poorest nations by \$5 billion over five years.

He was also one of many heads of state to sign the Millenium Declaration -- better known as the Monterrey Consensus -- which pledged huge foreign-aid increases as part of a comprehensive approach to eradicate global poverty.

KEY DELETIONS. That consensus seems to have broken down, however. With leaders from more than 170 nations set to convene in New York on Sept. 14 for another U.N. Summit -- which in part will be devoted to assessing whether rich and poor nations are living up to their promises in Monterrey -- the Bush Administration has withdrawn its support for the Millenium Development Goals, a set of targets championed by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and former World Bank President John Wolfensohn. Those goals include halving world poverty and providing basic education and medical care for the poor by 2015.

Among the hundreds of last-minute amendments to a draft U.N. consensus document proposed by John Bolton, Bush's controversial appointee as America's ambassador to the U.N., is a call to delete language indicating that greater foreign aid is needed to meet the Millenium Goals, to meet pledges to fully finance the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, and to make primary education free for the poor.

The U.S. also opposes references to a goal that all rich nations eventually devote at least 0.7% of gross domestic product to development assistance. The U.S. currently spends about 0.1% of GDP on foreign antipoverty programs.

SCOTLAND PLEDGE. To Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs, an architect of the Millenium Goals and a key advisor to Annan on poverty issues, the Bush move is a betrayal of the global antipoverty crusade that will impact millions of lives in Africa.

In an Aug. 31 conference call with journalists, Sachs accused the Bush Administration of trying to derail what he says has been growing momentum, especially in Europe, behind honoring the Monterrey foreign-aid commitments, "and to break free of U.S. responsibility, especially for the financing of these goals."

As recently as June, at a G-8 summit in Scotland, Bush joined other Western leaders in a communique endorsing greater funding to achieve the same poverty, health, and education goals, Sachs notes.

LIVES AT STAKE. Bolton argues that the U.S. never agreed in Monterrey to spending 0.7% of GDP on development assistance. Indeed, Washington has consistently opposed setting specific foreign-aid targets since the U.N. General Assembly first endorsed the 0.7% goal in 1970. The Declaration states, "we encourage developed countries that haven't done so to make concrete progress to 0.7%."

Even in Monterrey, though, Bush Administration officials stressed that they still oppose such targets. Instead, they argued that the development community should first focus more on improving the effectiveness of aid, to ensure that money spent actually alleviates poverty.

Sachs argues that there's more than ample evidence that well-managed international aid programs work, citing dramatic progress in initiatives to fight diseases such as malaria and to provide safe drinking water. For example, he says, "it's possible

to save the lives of millions of children who will die this year from malaria, which is entirely preventable because treatments are there."

BUDGET BOOST. Todd Moss, a research fellow at the Center for Global Development, a Washington think tank, thinks the U.S. still has an argument. "The issue is, how do we build an international system that allows poor countries to prosper, not just transfer as much money as possible. I'm very skeptical that we have cracked the nut of aid effectiveness."

Moss notes that if rich countries really spend 0.7% of GDP on development assistance, that would come to about \$200 billion. "Nobody thinks we can spend \$200 billion sensibly because the current aid system is dysfunctional."

Still, the U.S. could claim that their promise to double development assistance shows they're making progress in moving to that goal. Besides boosting U.S. contributions to international antipoverty programs, such as the Global AIDS Fund, Bush pledged to devote another \$5 billion to education, health, and development projects under the new Millennium Challenge Account.

NEOCONSERVATIVE DISLIKE. Under that program, the U.S. would fund programs in poor nations that have developed comprehensive development blueprints and set up systems to monitor the use of funds and their results. So far, only 16 nations are receiving these funds, and Congress has allocated just \$1.5 billion for 2005. But the Bush Administration still has boosted development assistance by 50% in the past three years, something the Clinton Administration couldn't accomplish.

So why are Bolton and other U.S. officials now pushing to ditch the high-minded diplomacy altogether? After all, the Millennium Goals are also championed by Britain's Tony Blair, a staunch U.S. ally, not to mention the rest of Europe. One obvious explanation is that Bolton is no fan of the U.N. By attacking the Millennium Goals, he's going after the initiative upon which Kofi Annan's hopes to build his legacy.

The ambitious antipoverty agenda also binds America to funding the kind of multilateral programs that U.S. neoconservatives detest. The U.S. "is saying to the world that we don't accept global partnership," Sachs charges.

PR NIGHTMARE. In the past few months, most European nations have reaffirmed their commitments to meeting the 0.7% foreign-aid target. The Bush Administration thinks such promises are grandstanding because nations such as Germany have too many budget constraints to honor such pledges. Conservatives also note that nations that are very generous with aid, such as the Netherlands, have very small militaries and don't shoulder much of the expense of maintaining global military operations that the U.S. does.

But the embarrassment for the U.S. could continue to rise as the year 2015 draws near and it becomes increasingly clear that the Millennium Goals will not be achieved. As the world's richest nation, blame for not doing more to halt the crises of AIDS, tuberculosis, lack of education, and extreme poverty inevitably will fall most heavily on America.

Whatever the Bush Administration's motives, it's hard to see how waging a public fight against international antipoverty goals will shape up as anything but a public-relations headache for the Bush Administration come Sept. 14 in New York.

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