

RELIGIOUS LEADER LETTER TO THE G8 ON HIV/AIDS AND DEBT

Dear President Bush,

As you prepare for the annual Group of Eight (G8) meeting in St. Petersburg, Russia, we the undersigned religious leaders ask that you address two critical issues that have a profound impact on the continent of Africa and implications for the rest of the world: the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the enduring international debt crisis. **We call on you to protect life by taking the lead in the G8 to secure sustainable financing for effective HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment programs funded by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and other bodies and to expand last year's debt deal to the rest of the African continent. We ask for greater U.S. and international investment in developing Africa's health care infrastructure, a new focus on addressing the rights and needs of women and girls, and a new commitment to achieving the goal of universal treatment access by 2010. We urge you to take lead with the rest of the G8 in creating a new initiative for training, support and retention of health workers to fight AIDS.**

Twenty-five years into this unprecedented pandemic, HIV/AIDS continues to kill millions of people each year - especially in Africa - not because this is an invincible disease, but because the international community has not done what's needed to stop it. Until there is a new sense of urgency, and a shift in U.S. and international policies that seek to respond to this crisis, HIV/AIDS will remain a permanent and deadly feature on the international landscape, and Africa will remain at 'ground zero' of this global pandemic.

African civil society organizations have pointed out that an effective response to HIV/AIDS requires a more urgent and comprehensive approach from the U.S. and the international community. It requires greater funding, a scale-up of effective prevention, treatment, care and support programs, support for the rights and needs of women and girls, and new investments in Africa's human resources and health care infrastructure. The resources are available, and effective programs exist. What is needed is more financial support, and more effective U.S. and international policies that support African priorities.

The Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is a multilateral vehicle that has mounted a successful and comprehensive response to HIV/AIDS in more than 130 countries, funding effective prevention, treatment and care programs. But the failure of the U.S. and other rich countries to provide adequate support to the Global Fund has left it facing chronic funding shortfalls and unable to scale up its programs to meet the needs on the ground. We call on you to lead an effort in the G8 this year to secure a significant increase for the Global Fund.

Africa needs at least 250,000 paid and trained community health workers. We invite you to launch, with the rest of the G8, a health care workers initiative that would support training and retention programs for health professionals and an increased investment in public health systems.

African efforts to confront HIV/AIDS are also still handicapped by the continent's massive debt burden, and by the policies of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), which constrain spending on health care in many African countries. The G8 took an important first step last year by canceling 100% of the debts owed to the IMF and World Bank by 18 countries, 14 in Africa. Already this action has enabled Zambia to increase access to treatment and abolish health clinic fees. This was only a first step however. We ask that you lead an initiative in the G8 this year to expand this debt deal to ensure immediate 100% cancellation of the debts of the other countries in Africa that have equally illegitimate debts and urgent health priorities. This cancellation must come free from harmful economic conditionality.

A successful approach to defeating HIV/AIDS globally will require a greater focus on supporting African efforts to turn the tide of this pandemic, and a new appreciation for the priorities of African governments and civil society who are on the front-lines of this crisis. We will be looking to your leadership at the G8 this year to fully fund the Global Fund, launch a health care worker initiative, and cancel Africa's illegitimate debts.

Sincerely,

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