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Bush to Boost Efforts to Assist Africans

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President Bush is intensifying efforts to help Africans suffering from war, famine and AIDS by agreeing to erase billions of dollars in international debt, dispatching two key White House officials to the region, and planning to announce more direct aid for Africa as early as next month, administration officials said.

Under pressure from world leaders, including British Prime Minister Tony Blair, to do more, Bush has signed off on a deal with the British to forgive billions of dollars African nations owe to international organizations such as the World Bank, the officials said yesterday. World leaders appear likely to approve a debt forgiveness plan next month in Scotland, at an economic summit of the seven richest nations and Russia, known as the Group of Eight.

In anticipation of the G8 meetings, Bush sent Michael J. Gerson and Kristen Silverberg, two of his top domestic policy advisers, to Africa for 10 days to review his AIDS initiative and other humanitarian efforts.

"It's a positive sign the administration is thinking seriously ahead of the G8 what more the U.S. can do," said Seth Amgott, a spokesman for Data, the pro-Africa group started by U2's Bono.

Two administration officials said Bush plans to announce additional aid to Africa at the G8 summit on top of the \$674 million in new assistance he announced at this week's White House meeting with Blair. Some administration officials are lobbying for Bush to commit to doubling the \$3.2 billion annual aid budget for Africa.

Bush's new efforts dramatize how Africa, once the forgotten continent when it came to international and domestic politics, is grabbing the attention of political leaders, including many in the United States.

Yet some Democrats and pro-Africa groups say Bush largely ignored the plight of Africans - until Blair and others demanded U.S. action. Moreover, they accuse Bush of not speaking out forcefully enough against what he calls the genocide in Sudan, and not spending enough to provide food and medicine to a continent in crisis. They also lament how the United States spends less money, when measured against the size of its total economy, than other rich nations.

Rep. Donald M. Payne (N.J.), the ranking Democrat on the House Africa subcommittee, called the level of U.S. aid to the continent "disgraceful" and said that while Bush has substantially stepped up assistance to battle AIDS and provide other forms of humanitarian relief, those changes have often come at the expense of other aid programs.

Susan E. Rice, a Brookings Institution scholar and former assistant secretary of state for African affairs in the Clinton administration, said the White House is not spending as much money as it says, but added, "I have to say this is much better than I might have feared."

Bush is moving to quiet critics. He has invited several African leaders to the White House for meetings and last week broke with other leaders by reiterating his belief that the killings in Darfur are genocide. Robert B. Zoellick, deputy secretary of state, recently made a second trip to Sudan to survey the situation. Yesterday, the White House released a message to the African people that will be aired on Voice of America. "At a time when freedom is on the march around the world, it is vital that the continent of Africa be a place of democracy and prosperity and hope, where people grow up healthy and have the opportunity to realize their dreams," Bush says.

The debt-forgiveness deal would aid several nations. U.S. and British officials presented their proposal yesterday at a meeting in London of the finance ministers of the G8 nations. If accepted by the finance ministers this weekend, the deal probably would be adopted.

"This very bold step builds momentum toward an historic breakthrough on aid and trade at the G8 summit next month," said Jamie Drummond, spokesman for the One Campaign, a group founded to fight global poverty and AIDS.

But an agreement between the United States and Britain does not guarantee it will be adopted as is, cautioned Steven Radelet, former deputy assistant treasury secretary for

international affairs in the Clinton and Bush administrations. Still, he predicted a 95 percent likelihood "of having a pretty significant debt deal" by the summit in Scotland.

The individual G8 countries have already erased the debt owed to them by poor countries. The U.S. and British plan would wipe away an additional \$40 billion owed by 18 countries, most of which are African, to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and African Development Bank, according to a draft of the agreement. The countries eligible for relief are Benin, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Gana, Guyana, Honduras, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

Eliminating the debt, which would cost the United States \$1 billion annually, would relieve the countries of making debt payments, freeing them to spend new money -- from loans or grants -- on social programs and economic development projects.

Bush has refused to endorse Blair's plan to double aid to Africa from rich nations to \$25 billion annually now and \$50 billion each year starting in 2015.

The White House has not decided how much more direct assistance to Africa it will offer at the G8 summit. The United States provides \$3.2 billion in aid and much more through Bush's AIDS program, which calls for \$3 billion a year to be spent combating the deadly disease, of which about 80 percent is expected to go to Africa. About half of the \$5 billion Bush has promised from the Millennium Fund, which provides financial assistance to governments that commit to democratic and economic reforms, will go to Africa.

Staff writer Michael A. Fletcher contributed to this report.

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