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Africa at the Summit

"There can be no excuse, no defense, no justification for the plight of millions of our fellow human beings in Africa today. And there should be nothing that stands in our way in changing it." That ringing summons was issued by Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair, earlier this year, when he presented the compelling findings and lucid recommendations of his Commission for Africa. Later this week, we will see whether President Bush has the vision and compassion to meet those challenges, and grasp a historic opportunity to radically improve the life prospects of millions of those fellow human beings.

An unusual and mutually reinforcing set of possibilities is converging around this week's summit meeting of the world's richest countries in Scotland. If Mr. Bush is truly the compassionate conservative he says he is, he will not let the moment pass with the United States continuing to contribute far less than its share to the international effort to include Africa in the prosperity of the 21st century.

Africa is not looking for handouts. It is looking for help in nurturing the human capital, physical infrastructure and governmental capacities that are indispensable to modern development. Africa's poor are asking the world's rich countries for an admission ticket to the modern world. America, the world's richest country, would betray its values and its humanity by holding back.

To his great credit, Mr. Bush has been more attentive to the problems of Africa than his recent predecessors. He has increased overall assistance, stepped up spending on H.I.V./AIDS programs and created the Millennium Challenge Account to reward Africa's best-governed countries. Last week he promised further increases, including a program to fight malaria, and new teacher training and scholarship money to help girls attend school.

But so far there has been a discouraging gap between Mr. Bush's generous declarations and the money Washington has actually made available to Africa. The White House has failed to push the Republican-controlled Congress to fully finance Mr. Bush's aid programs and failed to spur its own aid appointees to get the money flowing to where it is most urgently needed.

At this point, America's total worldwide spending on all forms of foreign aid still amounts to only a relatively stingy 0.16 percent of this country's gross national income, one of the lowest proportions in the developed world. Most European countries represented at this week's summit meeting are already giving substantially higher percentages of their smaller national incomes. Many have promised to double those percentages between now and 2010. Mr. Bush needs to commit Washington to a substantially faster rate of increase to make America once again a leader in global development.

A brighter future for Africa will require more than just increased aid. The other recommendations made by Mr. Blair's commission are just as important. Rich-world agricultural subsidies make it possible for high-cost American, European and Japanese farmers to undersell efficient African producers even in their home markets; they must be phased out. Attention and money must be devoted to strengthening peace agreements and preventing conflicts before they erupt - a far cheaper and more humane approach than waiting to send help only after genocide and other atrocities start appearing on international television screens.

Donors must also make certain that African governments are held accountable for how the money is spent. Western countries can fight corruption by urging their own companies to be more transparent about the money they pay to African governments for oil, diamonds and other valuable commodities and by pressing Western banks to better monitor and police suspicious deposits and fund transfers.

There is a desperate need for greater policy coherence in a period when many national governments, including Washington, are sensibly exhorting African governments to spend more on primary health care and education while international financial institutions largely controlled by those same Western governments have been pressing African countries to shrink their government payrolls, including teachers and health care workers.

Africa comes to this week's summit meeting proclaiming its commitment to be a responsible and constructive partner in its own development. It has made significant accomplishments over the past decade or so. These include a rising trend of multiparty elections across the continent (tyrannies like Zimbabwe's are now the exception, not the rule), an important reduction in the number and scope of destructive civil wars (Darfur being a tragic counterexample), the spread of enlightened economic management (notably in South Africa, Uganda and Ghana) and brave governmental forays against corruption in places like Nigeria.

Nurturing these positive trends and providing hope for Africa's millions, is, as Mr. Blair unflinchingly put it, "the fundamental moral challenge of our generation." We beseech Mr. Bush to embrace that challenge on behalf of the American people.

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