G8 countries set priorities for infectious diseases but fail to make progress on debt relief

Leaders of the world’s wealthiest countries committed themselves at a meeting held on 22–23 July to achieve ambitious targets to reduce the prevalence of malaria, tuberculosis and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). In a lavish summit in Okinawa, Japan, the heads of the Group of Eight (G8) nations noted that health is key to prosperity and pledged to go much further in fighting these three diseases, which particularly affect the developing world.

“Only through sustained action and coherent international cooperation to fully mobilize new and existing medical, technical and financial resources, can we strengthen health delivery systems and reach beyond traditional approaches to break the vicious cycle of disease and poverty,” the G8 said in a final statement.

The leaders promised to work with the World Health Organization to meet three targets by 2010: a 25% reduction in the number of young people infected with the human immunodeficiency virus, a 50% decrease in mortality due to tuberculosis, and a 50% reduction in the number of malaria cases.

Specifics will be drawn up at an international conference to be convened in Japan in the autumn, but several G8 countries, including the European nations and Japan, have already pledged additional resources to tackle these three diseases. The G8 also said it would address the contentious issue of how to make pharmaceuticals more cheaply available in developing countries. “We cannot be satisfied with a global health system in which the majority of patients are in the south while most of the medicines are in the north,” said French President Jacques Chirac.

Anti-poverty campaigners and global health care activists gave a cautious welcome to the G8 pledge to fight disease, but they emphasized that such an initiative needed to be carried out in tandem with measures to relieve the economic hardships of developing nations. “It is very good that the G8 have prioritized the fight against infectious diseases, but we are worried this commitment may end up as an empty promise like the one made last year on debt relief,” said Samantha Bolton of Médecins Sans Frontières.

There was widespread disappointment that the summit, which was staged at a cost of about US$ 800 million, failed to make any progress on the question of easing the burden on heavily indebted developing countries. At last year’s G8 summit in Cologne, Germany, the G8 pledged to relieve the debts of 81 heavily indebted poor countries, all of which spend more on interest payments than health care and education. However, because of the slow and complicated process, only 20 nations are expected to start receiving any relief by the end of the year. ■

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