

Friday, April 6, 2007

Aid eases hunger, HIV/AIDS in Africa

By James P. McGovern

I confess that I felt proud of our efforts in Ethiopia and Kenya aimed at combating hunger and HIV/AIDS.

U.S. Rep. James P. McGovern currently is on a fact-finding trip to Kenya, Ethiopia and Chad. This is the first of two articles for the Telegram & Gazette on his trip.

I held in my arms a tiny baby boy who had tested positive for the AIDS virus. He was one of some 400 kids I visited at an orphanage for HIV-positive children run by the Missionaries of Charity nuns in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The sisters explained to me the boy could not be given the anti-retroviral drugs to combat the disease because he was so malnourished that the drugs alone would kill him.

This little boy was absolutely beautiful; I didn't want to let go of him. It broke my heart.

Hunger is painful to watch. In Ethiopia more than half the population is hungry. The people have suffered from war, drought, famine and now AIDS. Millions have died and millions have become orphans. It's a poor country that does not have enough farmable land to feed its people — and for too long has reacted to emergencies without building a safety net to keep them alive in times of crisis.

But things are changing with the creation of a multi-year safety net program to help vulnerable Ethiopians withstand the shock of famine. The government — which is far from perfect — has created this strategy with support from the U.S., other governments, and many dedicated non-governmental organizations.

In Butajira, a rural area two hours from the capital, efforts are under way to provide the poor with skills, equipment and incentives for savings. Women are being given assistance to better market their pottery; food insecure individuals are raising silkworms and selling the cocoons for profit and farmers, with technical assistance from the U.S., are learning better ways to produce multiple harvests and feed their families.

In Legedini — a long and perilous jeep ride from Dire Dawa near the border of Somalia — I saw community efforts to protect the watershed and turn a virtual desert into a green area, where land can now produce enough to feed the people and with excess to sell at market. Incredible partnerships with USAID, Catholic Relief Services and the local Catholic church have resulted in innovative water projects, nutrition programs and even ecological sanitation, where human waste fertilizes soil where it is difficult to grow anything.

Clearly, the new approach to development in Ethiopia is slowly but surely working and deserves international support.

In the city of Dire Dawa, I visited an urban AIDS project, administered by the U.N. World Food Program and Save the Children, with support from the United States, where the focus is on improving the nutritional status of food insecure clients and their families.

Without adequate food, the drugs are useless. And for those who are severely ill or bedridden, without assistance their families go hungry.

Combating AIDS in Africa requires more than medicines and education — it also requires food. While medicines are becoming more available, food is becoming more scarce.

After Ethiopia I traveled to Kenya.

Among the most special moments in my trip were visits to McGovern-Dole International Food for Education Programs in Kenya. I helped author this initiative along with George McGovern, Bob Dole and Bill Clinton.

It has provided millions of poor children around the world with a daily nutritious meal in school, and has also attracted more children to school.

In the Maasai community, there exists a belief that girls don't deserve an education and should remain at home doing chores.

There is also a tradition of arranged marriages between girls as young as age 12 and much older men.

In Kajiado, a school run by the African Inland Church serves as a rescue center for Maasai girls.

Many actually board at the school out of fear that if they return home they will be forced into marriage.

A McGovern-Dole program at the school, administered by the World Food Program, has greatly boosted attendance and provides more than 600 girls with the nutrition they need to learn and be healthy.

I was moved by a girl named Grace, who refused her father's demand that she marry an older man when she was only 13.

In response, her father bought a sword with which to kill her, and actually demanded she bring him the weapon intended to end her life. She fled — and is now at the school doing exceptionally well. She is safe, healthy and, with an education, will have a bright future.

As one who has been critical of much of U.S. foreign policy, I confess that I felt proud of our efforts in Ethiopia and Kenya aimed at combating hunger and HIV/AIDS.

Addressing hunger and helping poor people become self-sufficient represents the best of America.

Food for peace is much better than weapons for war.

James P. McGovern is the U.S. representative to the 3rd Massachusetts District.

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