

The world wants peace and enough to eat

Human Rights
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The international community has not kept up with growing humanitarian needs. We propose several initiatives to remedy the situation, say LIONEL ROSENBLATT and LARRY THOMPSON

Dear Mr. Bush: You will be the leader of the most powerful country on earth. The 1980s and 1990s saw tremendous economic growth in the United States, but prosperity and influence has also seen Americans turn away from many challenges around the world.

The poorest people in the poorest countries are often trapped in a cycle of war, ethnic violence, drought and other humanitarian catastrophes. We believe that the United States has a moral obligation to help these people.

The international community has not kept up with growing international humanitarian needs. We propose for your consideration several initiatives for addressing the many humanitarian challenges you will surely face.

First, food aid needs are growing. Droughts in the Horn of Africa and Central Asia this year threaten tens of millions. Conflict in a score of other countries has also displaced tens of millions. Yet the international community attacks the food shortage piecemeal. We propose that you address the

root causes of food insecurity around the world and, as an interim measure, create an international reserve so that food is available for urgent needs.

Second, international peacekeeping mechanisms are inadequate. This often causes a demand on the United States to intervene to stop or mitigate a conflict or humanitarian crisis. There is a better way. The creation of an international standing rapid reaction force to respond to humanitarian crisis would take the burden off the United States.

A small, competent force composed of volunteers from countries which are not permanent Security Council members could respond to humanitarian crises in countries where the United States has no vital interests. Many experts agree that just 5,000 peacemak-

ers could have saved hundreds of thousands of lives in Rwanda in 1994.

Third, the international community has not solved the conundrum of protecting the lives of more than 20 million internally displaced persons around the world. These people lack the legal protection accorded to refugees. We suggest, as an initial step, that the international community designate a coordinator of international action for internally displaced persons and for each IDP crisis.

Fourth, the US should place more emphasis on conflict prevention, post-conflict management and encouraging durable solutions to security and humanitarian problems. There is no international organisation with a mandate to fill the yawning gap between relief and development programmes.

Thus, at the end of a conflict, displaced persons often find few if any opportunities to rebuild their lives. We need programmes to fill this gap.

Fifth, we believe that reform is necessary in the US government. All too frequently, US agencies respond separately rather than as a coherent unit to humanitarian crises. We recommend that you appoint a high-level US "czar" for international humanitarian action and place him or her in the National Security Council. Whether such a coordinator is appointed or not, it would be highly beneficial for the administration to appoint a group that could advise the administration on complex humanitarian emergencies.

Finally, we believe that the United States and the United Nations should address humanitarian challenges to-

gether. All too often, UN and other international aid organizations act in competition rather than unison. The response to a humanitarian emergency requires cooperation, coordination, and strong leadership. We propose that, in each humanitarian emergency, the United Nations, in consultation with the United States and others, name a crisis leader to oversee all aspects of the response. The payoff would be lives and resources saved.

These six proposals address compelling humanitarian problems. We hope you will regard them as urgent issues on which you should take early action.

The United States – a rich, generous country with a tradition of helping people – has a moral obligation to act to save lives. Humanitarian aid is also good public policy. Injustice, inequity, and poverty around the world will ultimately affect American well-being. By becoming a humanitarian activist, you will help ensure that the world you leave behind is better than the one you inherited.