Keep HOPE Alive

Here's what you can do for Africans with AIDS.

July 1, 1999 By Jesse Jackson Jr.

Last year, President Clinton took a six-day four-nation tour of Africa and vowed to set in motion measures to lessen the terrible economic, health and other burdens carried by most African nations. But since then, his administration has supported a bill—the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)—that would do little to solve the problems plaguing Africa; it doesn't even mention AIDS, which will soon be the continent's No. 1 killer.

Last year, the bill narrowly passed the House and died in the Senate. In response to numerous requests from grass-roots groups in both Africa and the United States, I introduced a very different type of Africa trade bill, the Human Rights, Opportunity, Partnership and Empowerment (HOPE) for Africa Act. It offers real, if limited, assistance to countries staggering under the weight of AIDS. At press time, 65 cosponsors had signed on to the bill.

Joining me in opposing the AGOA are most African leaders, including South African President Nelson Mandela, who called it "unacceptable." Indeed, the bill would require any country seeking U.S. trade benefits to rigidly adhere to inhumane International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements that African governments allocate a large percentage of their already-inadequate budgets to pay off foreign debt, with little left for such essentials as health and education.

The HOPE for Africa Act, on the other hand, is a strategy to begin to tackle the continent's economic crises. It provides equally generous trade benefits as does the AGOA, but with additional labor and environmental rules to ensure that trade benefits a broad array of Africans and Americans. It would require the United States to not only immediately cancel Africa's debt, but also to lobby the IMF and World Bank to cancel the much more crippling debts to their institutions. The bill would also boost U.S. foreign aid to Africa, targeting funds to promote AIDS education, prevention and treatment. And it would reverse the U.S. government's attempts to block African countries from exercising their rights under international trade law to authorize local production of generic versions of lifesaving patented drugs for their citizens with HIV and other diseases (see "License to Kill").

Scores of AIDS advocacy groups worldwide agree that HOPE is the better bill for Africa. In April, hundreds marched in Washington to send this message to Congress. They know what legislators do not: The devastation and misery wrought by the AIDS epidemic in Africa can scarcely be

exaggerated. Nine out of 10 people with HIV on this planet live on its poorest continent, and in some countries there, one out of four adults has the virus. It is critical that African governments be able to use as much of their revenues as possible for HIV prevention and treatment—a priority that can be realized if rich nations cancel debts and open their checkbooks. Greater international cooperation is necessary, and the HOPE for Africa Act lays the groundwork for such a global village–type approach, with the United States leading the way.

It's no surprise that pharmaceutical companies (along with oil, gas and timber concerns—and other corporate giants) support the AGOA, for it puts profits (theirs) over people. What does surprise is that so many members of Congress—both Democrats and Republicans—and administration officials also support the bill. If it passes, and Clinton signs it, that could doom efforts to get the United States to adopt a compassionate, effective approach to the African AIDS epidemic.

One of my former colleagues, California Democrat Ronald Dellums, has devised his own innovative strategy to deal with the crisis—one that would complement HOPE for Africa. He recently unveiled a major proposal to cobble together a $400 million African version of the "Marshall Plan"—the U.S. initiative that rebuilt post–World War II Europe—with half the pot coming from pharmaceutical firms and half from the federal government. That money would be used to increase treatment access and improve health care overall. The emergency in Africa is every bit as terrible as the ruin that overwhelmed Europe in 1945, and its people are as deserving.

ACTION JACKSON

Call or fax your congressional reps and tell them to support the HOPE for Africa Act. For contact info, click on **www.house.gov/writerep**.

For more about the HOPE for Africa Act, contact the Health GAP Coalition at 215.731.1844, or click on **www.tradewatch.org**.

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