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A New Threat to World Health

The Third World is the place in which 75% of the world's population resides, where 86% of all babies are born, and where 98% of all infant and childhood deaths occur. For 1.1 billion people in the 40 poorest countries, it is shocking to realize that life expectancy at birth is but 46 years, mortality under 5 years is 22%, access to clean water in rural areas is 15%, and 31% of the children suffer from malnutrition. Per capita income averages \$310 per year. As of 1982, 0.5% of the children became lame from polio, 1% died from neonatal tetanus, 2% succumbed to whopping cough, 3% died from measles, and ten kids died of vaccine preventable illness every minute.

The agency that has the greatest impact on the health and quality of life of the people in the developing countries is, in most cases, the World Health Organization. WHO established the Expanded Program for Immunization which has increased the number of children vaccinated against the six major killing and disabling childhood diseases from 5% to almost 50% in the past decade and is committed to making it accessible to all children in the world by 1990. It set up a Program on Diarrhoeal Disease Control to prevent the needless death of 4.5 million children a year worldwide. It is the center of information on maternal and child health. And at the Venice Summit, our President and the leaders of the major industrialized nations asked WHO to serve as the major coordinating and promoting agency for research on AIDS. WHO has formulated a Global Strategy for Health for All by the Year 2000, based on the principle that health is a powerful lever for socioeconomic development (and political stability as well). And precisely 10 years ago, WHO brought about the eradication of smallpox, saving innumerable lives (and the United States \$110 million per year in vaccination costs alone). Today and in the future, international travel will help speed the spread of disease among all countries. We will serve both ourselves and others if we provide our share of support to WHO.

WHO is suffering the worst crisis in its history, and ironically we are the cause. Without reason or notice the U.S. government has unilaterally and arbitrarily refused to pay its assessment. We are \$118 million in arrears for 1986-87. That represents a cut of almost 25% in an annual budget that has had zero real growth for 6 years. No organization can function with an unplanned reduction in budget of that magnitude, and drastic cuts in its programs and skilled personnel are now being made.

WHO was caught by the Kassebaum amendment directed at punishing the United Nations' system because "the U.N. and its specialized agencies, which are financed through assessed contributions of member states, have not paid sufficient attention in the development of their budgets to the views of the member governments who are major financial contributors to those budgets." For WHO this is tragic because the objection simply does not pertain. WHO has its own budget process independent of the U.N.'s, and U.S. government representatives have repeatedly acknowledged that its views have invariably been fully taken into account in the budgetary process. Curiously, the United States since 1981 has praised WHO's efficiency and voted in support of the WHO budget. Yet we do not pay our assessment. Now, WHO is caught in the Gramm-Rudman budget constraints and is unlikely to receive its past or future U.S. assessments.

WHO was created in 1948 by an international treaty that was ratified by the U.S. Senate. Thus the failure of the United States to pay its assessment constitutes a violation of a treaty obligation. The response of the American people to the past African famine indicates that we are among the most generous of people and committed to trying to improve the lives of the poorest of the earth. And my experience in Ethiopia and elsewhere indicates that, independent of their form of government, people everywhere know and appreciate that. They will be tragically disillusioned when explanations are forthcoming for cutbacks in WHO programs in health that directly affect their lives. WHO is a unique institution whose work improves the lives of all of us, but particularly those in the Third World. On grounds of quality and importance it deserves the full funding of the U.S. assessment.—BARRY R. BLOOM, *Chairman of the Department of Microbiology and Immunology, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York 10461, and Chairman of the Committee on the Immunology of Tuberculosis, Special Programme for Vaccine Development, World Health Organization*