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Bush: aid to poor nations especially needed now

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WASHINGTON -- Amid global economic turmoil, President Bush said Tuesday that it's more important than ever for the United States and other prosperous nations to help the less fortunate.

"During times of economic crisis, some may be tempted to turn inward _ focusing on our problems here at home while ignoring our interests around the world. This would be a serious mistake," Bush said at a summit on international development. "America is committed and must stay committed to international development for reasons that remain true regardless of the ebb and flow of the markets."

Bush said that during the past eight years, the United States has provided more foreign assistance than at any time in the past half century. His policies on foreign aid are embodied in the Millennium Challenge Account, which invests in nations that embrace democracy and free markets, fight corruption and invest in education and health.

In a speech highlighting his administration's foreign aid work, Bush said the U.S. has:

_ Provided more than \$16 billion in food assistance for tens of millions of people around the world; dedicated nearly \$1 billion to improve sanitation and water supplies in developing nations; and has committed \$5.5 billion to address hunger during the next two years to help with the global food crisis.

_ Helped start kindergartens in Jordan; teach hundreds of thousands of children about information technology in Morocco; built 70 schools for girls in Egypt; and train more than 700,000 teachers, distribute more than 10 million textbooks and provided hundreds of thousands of scholarships to help girls go to school in Africa. The U.S. also is spending \$425 million to improve education in Ethiopia, Ghana, Honduras, Liberia, Mali and Yemen; and helping more than 400,000 children learn to read in Latin American nations.

_ Signed free trade agreements with 14 nations compared with three when Bush took office.

_ Launched a five-year, \$1.2 billion malaria initiative to reduce deaths in 15 African nations by half.

_ Supported HIV/AIDS treatment for nearly 1.7 million people in sub-Saharan Africa and tens of thousands more from Asia to the Caribbean to Eastern Europe. The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief has supported care for more than 6.6 million people worldwide and allowed nearly 200,000 children in Africa to be born HIV-free through mother-to-child prevention work.

J. Brian Atwood, dean of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota and administrator of USAID during the Clinton administration, praised the Bush administration's work to link aid with measurable results. But Atwood criticized the current administration, as well as previous administrations, for not coordinating U.S. international aid work.

"They haven't done anything about the basic structural problem, which is that our foreign aid programs are scattered all over the map," he said. "They are chaotic and incoherent and you're not getting the bang for the buck that you would get if you would have, for example, a single Cabinet department running the whole show like they do in the United Kingdom."

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