

BELINDA STRONACH

Africa needs our help to defeat malaria Belinda Stronach and Tony Blair

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Today, as part of the United Nations high-level meeting on the Millennium Development Goals, the world will gauge its progress in fighting the scourge of malaria in Africa. While there is reason for optimism, renewed vigour is required in the fight against a disease that kills nearly one million people a year, many of them under the age of 5.

While we have largely eliminated malaria in our own countries, the disease still kills with ruthless efficiency across much of Africa, where 3,000 children die each day.

Malaria is almost entirely preventable using existing technologies. A simple bed net significantly reduces the likelihood of the disease being spread. Anti-malarial drugs can radically reduce disease and death. Research into new technologies, such as a vaccine, is promising and supported by significant investment. We have within our power the ability to defeat malaria with a burst of rapid, concerted action. Today's meeting must serve as a catalyst to a renewed and accelerated campaign.

The most pressing need is for bed nets. Treated with insecticide, these nets can protect a sleeping family from malaria-carrying mosquitoes. They represent a critical first wave of prevention.

A little more than half the required 250 million nets have been pledged. This past April, on World Malaria Day, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called for governments, corporations, foundations and citizens to close that gap and ensure that bed nets are available to all who need them by the end of 2010. The equation is as simple as it is dire: The longer we take to provide Africans with these essential tools, the more people will die. The longer we take to put an end to a disease we can stop, the more people will die. Malaria is more than a disease. It is a global injustice that the people of Canada and Britain need to face together.

Through our respective foundations, we are both active in the campaign to beat malaria. Overseas, the Tony Blair Faith Foundation has called for people of all religions to respond to an urgent 10-week campaign to pay for one million bed nets. Particularly in Africa, faith communities reach the poorest and most isolated communities with health care and their importance in halting and reversing the incidence of malaria is increasingly acknowledged by governments. But they urgently need more financial support from global funds.

In Canada, Spread the Net has demonstrated the considerable power of grassroots philanthropy, raising enough funds to purchase and deliver more than 250,000 bed nets. A donation of \$10 buys and delivers one net to protect up to as many as five people; a single bed net can protect an entire household. With each donation, we bear witness to the fact that human concern can transcend borders and oceans. Each transaction represents one person's caring for another, expressed through the gift of protection.

The defeat of malaria is, above all else, a moral imperative. But it would do more than save countless lives and keep families whole. It would contribute to an invigorated Africa - improving economic productivity, strengthening communities and reducing the burden on the health care system.

Liberia is one of the countries of Africa all too familiar with the human toll wrought by malaria. Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf put it so beautifully when she said: "It's not only that the children of Africa deserve a future. It's that Africa itself deserves the future these children would have. Africa deserves the help they would provide in developing and building the continent."

The people of Africa have the talents and energy to overcome the problems facing them. All they need is the help and commitment from the rest of us. We owe them nothing less.