

Civic leaders envision a safer, poverty-free world

White House visit: Group
says extreme destitution major cause of instability

BY LES BLUMENTHAL
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WASHINGTON – In the months after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, a group of prominent civic and business leaders in Washington state began discussing what could be done to prevent future attacks and enhance the chances for a peaceful world.

Their conclusion: Eliminate extreme

global poverty.

On Monday, leaders of the Seattle Initiative for Global Development briefed the White House and other top administration officials on their plan.

“Long-term peace in the world is ultimately and completely dependent on eliminating global poverty,” said William Gates Sr., a Seattle lawyer, father of Microsoft founder Bill Gates and chairman of the world’s largest philanthropic foundation. “Our game plan is to persuade policy-makers this is important and that it needs to move up the scale of priorities.”

Please see **Poverty, back page**

Poverty

Continued from A1

While the goal might sound lofty and the price tag expensive – up to \$20 billion annually – the alliance insists providing a boost to the billions of people in the world surviving on less than \$1 a day might be critical to America’s national security and economic future.

“Eliminating extreme global poverty is the most effective way to address the gravest challenges facing the world at present – from HIV/AIDS to terrorism, from environmental degradation to regional instability,” said Dan Evans, a former Washington governor and U.S. senator. “Its elimination is the single most important step we can take in realizing a better future for the United States and the world.”

When the group first got together, global poverty was barely on its radar screen, Evans said. But after more than a year of discussions, it became clear that the future of the United States was inextricably linked to the fate of the world’s poor.

“Surprisingly, but unanimously, we selected abject poverty as our goal,” Evans said at a news conference after the group met with national security adviser Condoleezza Rice and U.S. trade representative Robert Zoellick.

The group has produced a 15-page policy briefing paper that in some ways helps define the issue.

By way of example, the group said the life expectancy of people living in sub-Saharan Africa is 50, compared with 77 in the United States. Eighty-five percent of the women in Burkina Faso cannot read, compared with 3 percent in the United States.

Worldwide, 113 million children of primary school age are not in school, and 40 percent of those who are enrolled do not complete fifth grade. Millions of people are dying each year from HIV/AIDS and millions more from malaria. More than 1.5 billion have no access to clean water.

“This is the face of extreme poverty,” the policy report said.

For retired Gen. John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, eliminating global poverty could be the key to ending instability, military crisis and “bloody” wars.

“It’s fair to say instability and crisis find a breeding ground in areas where people have no hope,” he said.

The group estimates it would cost \$40 billion to \$60 billion annually to reduce global poverty and believes the United States’ share should be about \$20 billion annually. The money would be for health care, education and economic development.

With the mounting federal deficit, the group also realizes both the administration and Congress might not be in a mood to provide such funding.

“It’s a long-term game,” Gates said. “We have no expectation it will happen this year.”

But Gates and others said the plan was to start building support both in Washington, D.C., and among business and civic leaders nationwide.

“It would be a mistake to say we are here (in Washington, D.C.) for the money,” said former EPA administrator William Ruckelshaus. “We are trying to build public support into political support.”

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Alliance members

Members of the alliance include: William Gates Sr.; Dan Evans, a former senator and three-term governor; former EPA administrator William Ruckelshaus; retired Gen. John Shalikashvili, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and officials of such major corporations as Boeing, Microsoft, the Russell Co., Alaska Air, Delta Air Lines, Fratelli’s Ice Cream, Weyerhaeuser, Tully’s Coffee and Teledesic.