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Bill Gates Sr. Urges Huge Aid Increase for World's Poorest

By Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON, Jan 26 (IPS) - The head of the world's biggest private foundation and major figures in the business community are calling on the Bush administration and lawmakers to approve huge increases in development aid to eliminate absolute poverty, the most effective way to address the global challenges facing the United States, they argue.

"The Seattle Initiative for Global Development", which its sponsors are introducing in meetings with President George W. Bush's national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice, top cabinet members and key lawmakers on Capitol Hill, is urging Washington to provide some 20 billion dollars in annual funding towards that goal.

The United States currently provides only about one-quarter of that total towards that goal, mostly in funds for child health and the fight against the global HIV/AIDS epidemic.

The 64-member group, most of whose members are current or former top business executives in and around the northwest U.S. City of Seattle -- as well as two former Washington State governors -- says it will work with business and civic leaders in other cities across the country to build support for such a large hike.

"We will talk about the importance of alleviating extreme poverty as an economic and national security issue", said Bill Gates Sr, an Initiative co-founder. "But, from my point view, this is a humanitarian issue. People are dying; people are starving to death ... we need to help them".

Gates, the father of Microsoft founder and chairman Bill Gates Jr, is co-chairman of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which, with an endowment of some 26 billion dollars, is the world's largest private foundation. It has donated hundreds of millions of dollars to combating the HIV/AIDS crisis and other global health scourges over the past several years.

The Initiative, which includes a paper laying out major policy principles to be followed in fighting a global attack on poverty, comes amid growing concerns over the fiscal health of the U.S. government.

Tax cuts and spending on Iraq, Afghanistan, "homeland security" and other initiatives have transformed a healthy surplus inherited by Bush in 2001 to a record deficit approaching 500 billion dollars this year.

It also comes amid continuing debate over how best to carry out Bush's "war on terrorism".

Until now, the administration and its backers have argued that terrorism is not the result of absolute poverty. Most terrorists, according to this view, hail from middle-class or more comfortable backgrounds, and are motivated primarily by a sense of humiliation that could be best addressed by making their governments more responsive to popular aspirations through political and economic liberalisation.

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While the Seattle Initiative's signers do not disagree with that perspective, they stress that countries that suffer abject poverty often provide terrorists with rich opportunities for recruitment and places to operate. While terrorists are themselves not the result of abject poverty, they take advantage of countries that suffer instability and conflict.

"Terrorists find a breeding ground in areas that are extremely poor and where people have no hope", said retired Gen John Shalikashvili, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff under former President Bill Clinton (1993-2001) and an Initiative signer.

"The elimination of such poverty would bring more stability to the rest of the world."

"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 former Washington State Governor, Dan Evans.

"Its elimination is the single most important step we can take in realising a better future for the United States and the world", added Evans, a moderate member of Bush's Republican Party, who also served in the U.S. Senate.

People with an income of less than one dollar a day are considered to be living in absolute poverty. Estimates of the number of absolute poor today range from 800 million to 1.2 billion, the vast majority living in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Global leaders who attended the United Nations Millennium Summit in 2000 pledged to cut the number of people living in absolute poverty in half by the year 2015, but if current trends hold over the next decade, the world will fall far short of that goal.

To achieve it, independent experts have said official development assistance (ODA) worldwide

should be doubled from roughly 50 billion dollars a year today to at least 100 billion dollars. But much of that money goes to middle-income countries, where abject poverty is less significant.

The Bush administration has increased U.S. ODA, but it still ranks last on a per capita basis among all developed nations.

Not counting major infusions of U.S. aid for Afghanistan and Iraq, the administration has roughly tripled U.S. spending on the global HIV/AIDS epidemic and has also established a new aid channel, the Millennium Challenge Account (MCA), which is supposed to provide additional funds for countries that fight corruption, liberalise their economies, promote good governance, and respect human rights.

But the MCA has received only one billion dollars to date, and the number of countries that meet its eligibility requirements and have large numbers of absolute poor are very few.

With a large Scandinavian population and a large middle class, Seattle's business leadership has traditionally been relatively progressive and civic-minded.

As a port with several major export-oriented industries, including Boeing and lumber giant Weyerhaeuser, it has also been more internationally minded than many other U.S. cities of comparable size.

Washington State Republicans like Evans and William Ruckelshaus, a former Weyerhaeuser executive who served as the first administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Nixon administration (1969-74) and co-founded the Initiative, have historically located themselves on the liberal wing of the Republican Party, although in recent years the state party, like the national one, has moved strongly to the right.

"I don't see it as a Democrat or Republican thing", stressed Bill Clapp, a former Weyerhaeuser director who co-founded Global Partnerships, a

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Seattle-based organisation that provides private-sector management skills and capital to poverty-alleviation groups in Central America.

He stressed that the group's ideological preferences did not affect its welcome at the White House, his access this week to top State Department officials, U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick and Commerce Secretary Don Evans.

"We're getting a warm reception here", Clapp said.

A sound poverty elimination strategy should rest on four principles, including investments in education, health and economic opportunity; good governance; opening global markets to exports from poor countries; and encouraging innovative public-private partnerships, according to the Initiative.

But it also stressed that political will, a multilateral approach and more money were indispensable elements for a successful strategy. "We're resource advocates", Gates said.