

US Helping Fight Malaria in Sub-Saharan Africa

By Margaret Besheer
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Malaria afflicts as many as 500 million people each year around the world. More than 1 million die, most of them children under the age of five living in sub-Saharan Africa. Last June, President Bush launched an initiative committing \$1.2 billion over the next five years to combating the disease in 15 of Africa's hardest-hit countries. Part of that plan includes working with faith-based organizations in reaching out to affected communities. In Washington Thursday, First Lady Laura Bush spoke at a conference about the project. VOA's Margaret Besheer has more.

Malaria, a mosquito-borne disease caused by a parasite, is highly preventable and treatable, yet it remains one of the most pressing crises in the global community.

The President's Malaria Initiative hopes to cut the death rate in half by 2008. Aid from the American people has already reached more than six million Africans. This year, 30 million more will receive medicines, mosquito repellent and bed nets treated with insecticide as the program expands. Speaking at a White House-sponsored conference on the issue Thursday, Mrs. Bush said one of the program's goals is to utilize faith-based groups in its efforts to fight this disease.

"In many African villages, churches are the only formal institutions that can manage malaria control and prevention. In malaria-prone regions, people look first to their churches, mosques or synagogues for help," she said. "They trust their pastors to provide it."

Robert Tortora is with the Gallup organization, which does international polls and surveys. His research shows that religious organizations are good way to reach the African population.

"And if you look at institutions and you ask sub-Saharan Africans about confidence in institutions, the number one institution that they have confidence in is religious organizations," he noted.

One of the simplest and most effective ways of preventing malaria infection is through the use of inexpensive netting that is treated with insecticides and draped over a bed. Tortora says because Africans have confidence in their religious leaders, they can be very effective in educating people on how to use these nets properly, getting nets out to the population, especially those in vulnerable rural areas, and thereby reduce infection rates.

Mrs. Bush says this type of partnership has already been effective in parts of Africa.



Emelia Jorge tends to one of her eight-month-old twins, both of whom are suffering from malaria in Mozambique



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"Religious groups add to the anti-malaria resources committed by the United States and our partner governments," she added. "And they heal the sick and suffering with the faith, hope and love that governments cannot provide."

On Wednesday, the U.S. Congress approved funding for malaria, allocating an additional \$25 million over what the White House asked for. Organizations working against the disease say that extra money will help benefit an additional 10 million people this year.

First Lady Laura Bush (file photo)