Commission demands end to “festering sore” of African poverty

Owen Dyer *London*

A report by the Commission for Africa has called on rich nations to take a “Hippocratic oath” to the African continent, promising to “first do no harm.” The 450 page report breaks new ground by acknowledging not just Africa’s perennial problem of bad governance but also the role that the West has played in impoverishing the continent.

Prime Minister Tony Blair, who has frequently spoken of the need to tackle the “festering sore” of African poverty, set up the Commission for Africa a year ago. The Africa Commissioners include Britain’s chancellor of the exchequer, Gordon Brown; the secretary of state for international development, Hilary Benn; singer Bob Geldof; and two heads of state: Benjamin Mkapa, president of Tanzania, and Meles Zenawi, prime minister of Ethiopia. Nine of the 17 commissioners are themselves Africans. With the publication of this report, the commission’s principal task is now finished.

The report says: “The trading relationship between the developed and developing worlds has long been one dominated by a complex web of rules, taxes, tariffs, and quotas which massively bias the entire business of international trade in favour of the rich.” It accuses the industrialised world of being a “wilful obstacle” to African development. It notes that a typical European cow receives \$2 (£1.04; €1.43) a day in subsidies, double the average daily income in sub-Saharan Africa, and the total spent by rich countries on farming subsidies in 2002 was equivalent to the income of the region’s entire population.

Although state corruption has traditionally been blamed for the disappointing results of aid, the report argues that bribes often come from Western sources, notably in the mining and extractive industries. The private accounts of some African leaders contain billions of dollars, and the commission estimates that the stolen money held in Western banks is equal to half of the continent’s foreign debt. Banks should be required

to give notice of suspicious accounts, the report argues, and new laws are needed to freeze or repatriate illegal funds.

To date, not one member of the G8 has ratified the United Nations Convention Against Corruption, the first international legal instrument to recognise the need for all states to return to its country of origin

Prime Minister Tony Blair (left) with Bob Geldof at the launch of the report, described by Oxfam as a “rallying call for a generation”

embezzled money placed by corrupt officials in foreign bank accounts. In Britain, the All-party Parliamentary Group on the (African) Great Lakes Region and Genocide Prevention has accused the Department of Trade of failing to adequately investigate UN allegations about the activities of British based mining companies in central Africa.

Africa’s endemic wars pose another substantial obstacle to development, say the commissioners, and the current war in Congo is claiming “the biggest death toll since the Second World War.” The report calls on Western nations to bear half of the cost of peacekeeping operations carried out by the African Union.

Despite the AIDS crisis and the continuing menace of tuberculosis and malaria, the commis-

sioners see some hope for African health systems, noting that many African countries made substantial increases to their health budgets after the 2000 Abuja Declaration on AIDS, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases. Yet the average spending on the health of sub-Saharan Africans, at \$13-\$21 annually, is still less than 1% of the Western average.

It is not only the temptation of higher salaries in the West that leads to African health workers leaving their home country, says the report. Many also quit medicine in despair at working with-

take risks. They describe an interview with a woman in Nairobi, not infected with HIV, who explained that it would take her five years to become ill with the disease but only months for her baby to die of starvation. Having unprotected sex for money was the rational thing to do. “Such is the terrible logic of poverty,” they argue.

Other annual financial commitments called for by the report include \$10bn-\$20bn for health systems, \$13bn for education, \$3bn to improve technology, \$20bn for infrastructure, and \$10bn to fight AIDS. In total, the report concludes that Africa needs an extra \$25bn a year in aid by 2010 and a further \$25bn a year by 2015.

To meet these needs, developed countries should commit 0.7% of their gross national product, the report says. This figure was first agreed as a target by the UN General Assembly in 1970. Britain was one of several countries that pledged to meet the target, but none ever has. Britain currently gives 0.31% of its gross national product, slightly better than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average. The most generous donor is Canada, the least the United States. A spokesman for Britain’s Department for International Development now intends to meet the 0.7% target by 2013.

The Africa Commission endorsed Chancellor Gordon Brown’s idea of an international financing facility to coordinate investment, but that suggestion has already been rejected by the United States and Canada at the G8 summit in February.

Richard Feachem, director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, praised the report’s “clear, bold, and realistic vision,” but Oxfam’s Adrian Lovett said, “In the long term, history will judge this report not just by its content but by its capacity to deliver genuine change. This report can be a rallying call for a generation that will no longer tolerate the obscenity of extreme poverty in Africa—or it could end up gathering dust. It’s now up to world leaders to make that choice.” □

The full report is available at www.commissionforafrica.org/english/report/thereport/cfafullreport.pdf