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Malaria crisis may doom Africa progress, MPs say

Sarah Boseley, health editor
Thursday June 9, 2005
[The Guardian](#)

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The UK's plans for a prosperous Africa are doomed to failure unless malaria, the world's most lethal disease, is tackled as a global health crisis, an all-party group of MPs will warn in a report today.

Malaria kills between 1 million and 3 million people a year - several times as many as died in the genocide in Rwanda. Most of them are in Africa, where malaria is the biggest killer of children under five. The HIV/Aids pandemic which has swept Africa has made treatment less likely, because hospitals are so overcrowded and nurses and doctors themselves have fallen ill.

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Yet ironically, says the report from the all-party parliamentary malaria group, unlike HIV/Aids, the tools for the eradication of malaria are to hand - insecticide impregnated bednets, house spraying and new drugs based on the Chinese artemisinin plant.

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"The biggest obstacle to progress at present is not a shortage of science, but a paucity of political will to deal with malaria," the report will say. "Compared with Aids, for example, malaria is neglected by politicians, researchers, activists and the media."

The Commission for Africa said that half the deaths of African children from malaria could be avoided if parents had access to nets and drugs that cost not much more than \$1 (about 55p) a dose. Malaria eradication has been described as a potential "quick win" towards a number of the millennium development goals, such as reducing child mortality, and the economic benefits would be huge.

The World Bank estimates that malaria costs Africa \$12bn a year in lost productivity. Yet international funding for malaria control is only \$100m-\$200m a year. The committee says that \$2bn-3bn a year is needed to make an impact - about the cost of two or three days of farm subsidies in the EU and US.

The international development minister Gareth Thomas called the report "a useful focus for the debate about malaria" at a time when the world was looking at topping up the Global Fund for HIV/Aids, TB and malaria. The fund, of which the UK was a founder member, gives grants to poor countries whose plans for fighting the diseases it approves.

Yesterday Richard Feachem, its British executive director, was in London to launch its first advertising campaign, designed to make people aware of its successes and put pressure on the G8 nations and others to give it more money. He will be pressing the UK to double its contribution to \$200m for this year and treble it to \$300m next year and the year after.

"For the millennium development goals, it is a necessary requirement that we really turn around the three big infectious disease pandemics. If we don't, many of the other goals are pie in the sky," he said.

HIV infection is running at over 30% in southern Africa and 42% in Swaziland. "Unless we begin to turn them round the future is extremely grim."

The fund's first 51 programmes to have reached the two-year mark have shown remarkable results, Dr Feachem said, reaching between 84% (bednets) and 171% (Aids orphans) of their targets.

Yesterday Médecins sans Frontières launched a campaign to draw attention to the paucity of research into the diseases of Africa. It got the backing of more than 15 Nobel laureates, including Sir John Sulston, Dario Fo, Nadine Gordimer and Desmond Tutu for a global appeal for new treatments for neglected diseases, such as sleeping sickness and Chagas disease.

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