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Saving millions of lives

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Can a disease that needlessly kills a million Africans and makes another 300 million worldwide sick every year awaken the national and global consciousness? We are about to find out.

Malaria is a disease of contradiction -- it is both one of the most prevalent and deadly diseases in Sub-Saharan Africa and also the most preventable and treatable. It disproportionately affects children under 5 and pregnant women, and it has been successfully eliminated from many countries with temperate climates, including the United States. Africa south of the Sahara is home to the most deadly and efficient species of mosquito, but powerful tools exist -- like long-lasting insecticide treated bed nets -- to prevent transmission of the disease and effective drugs to treat it.

People with malaria suffer fever, headache, vomiting and other flu-like symptoms. If untreated, the infection can lead to coma, life-threatening anemia, neurological disorders, and death. A new study shows the tragic cycle of malaria and HIV/AIDS, each fueling the other. You have to see the suffering to believe it. The sight of young mothers holding children who appear comatose in Rwandan clinics should make other fevers rage.

In addition to the human suffering, Malaria also strains health care systems, local economies and social advancement. In Africa, malaria accounts for up to 50 percent of outpatient and inpatient visits in high malaria transmission regions and 40 percent of public health spending. Malaria saps 20 percent from Africa's growth every year. Sick children miss school, local agriculture and economies wane, tourism suffers, and foreign investment is stifled. Malaria disproportionately affects the rural poor, who can neither afford a bed net for prevention, nor access the appropriate treatment when they fall sick.

The tide may be turning. Fresh leadership is making a difference. Many African countries now have malaria control plans, and outside efforts must work in tandem with them.

President Bush has announced a \$1.2 billion investment over five years and Thursday is hosting with first lady Laura Bush a White House Summit on Malaria to help galvanize the private sector. The President's Malaria Initiative has an aggressive campaign to cut the mortality rate for malaria across Africa in half. The Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria, to which the United States contributes one-third of the

funding, has set out to provide hundreds of millions of bed nets and anti-malarial treatments.

The World Bank recently initiated a booster program to make strategic investments to fight this deadly disease in Africa. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pumped \$860 million into malaria control, is funding the development of a vaccine, and testing innovative malaria control efforts in Zambia and expanding to five other countries.

The civic power of malaria is also strong -- and should draw each of us into the fight. For \$10, every person can buy lifesaving bed nets and the education on its use to protect families from the deadly bite of a mosquito when people sleep at night. The CEO of the largest corporation to the youngest child with a lemonade stand can organize efforts that directly save lives. People leave the voting booth with patriotic stickers, "I voted today." They could leave their schools, workplaces, churches and neighborhoods with stickers saying, "I saved a life today."

Malaria No More is a non-profit and network of leading organizations in the United States and globally, whose mission is to ignite a grass-roots movement of individuals and private sector institutions that will help end malaria deaths. It supports a comprehensive approach to the problem through education, prevention and treatment.

The world knows how to get malaria under control -- through bed nets, lifesaving drugs, elimination of mosquito breeding grounds, and the education and training on the ground to sustain these efforts over time. Leading institutions need to gather around a common plan, led by African plans, that gives priority to more than a dozen countries designated by the President's Malaria Initiative where malaria is causing the most harm.

Working in partnership with governments and private institutions, everyone can play a role in ending malaria on the African continent and saving the lives of millions of children who deserve the gift of growing up.

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