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Eliminating hunger is today's moral imperative

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SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

Occasionally, an issue arises that presents a moral imperative to act. Ending slavery was one such issue, as were extending suffrage to all citizens and opposing Hitler in the 1940s.

Today, we face a moral challenge to eliminate the ongoing tragedy of world hunger.

Basic math tells us this hunger is preventable. Our world of 6 billion produces enough to feed 10 billion. Yet almost a billion people go hungry.

According to the World Food Program, 18,000 children perish from hunger each day. That's more people than live in Newton (15,000) or Indianola (14,000).

With the combined scourges of hunger and AIDS, life expectancy in Zambia is 33. In other countries, it's even less.

Eliminating hunger isn't solely a moral issue. There are compelling practical reasons. As Norman Borlaug, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and founder of the World Food Prize, says, and other experts attest, "You can't build peace on empty stomachs."

Hunger and poverty actively contribute to the rise of terrorism. Hunger, malnutrition and the disease and sickness that they cause undermine human development and drain the entire world economy.

As a country, the United States must do more, and the upcoming 2007 farm bill provides an excellent opportunity for two major accomplishments.

First is to address the worldwide crisis caused by the combined effects of AIDS and hunger.

At the AIDS center run by the Indiana University School of Medicine and Moi University in Eldoret, Kenya, HIV-positive Kenyans receive two prescriptions. One is for AIDS medications, and one is for food. Just like prescriptions familiar to Americans that are labeled "take with food," anti-AIDS drugs don't work on a malnourished body.

Unfortunately, the program does not have access to enough food to fill its own prescriptions. The center's doctors have been forced to start farming operations, and they have been successful. Their large-scale, irrigated farms would make any Iowa farmer proud.

Yet while the doctors' initiative is commendable, their medical education is best used in hospitals and clinics - not in farm fields.

We must supplement the significant U.S. and international effort to fight AIDS with an adequate anti-hunger component. Without a dedicated food-assistance program, investments to fight AIDS will not reach their maximum potential. The farm bill is the perfect place to initiate such a program.

The second program was initiated by former Sens. Bob Dole and George McGovern, who propose ensuring that the 300 million poorest children in the world get at least one good meal a day while at school.

Their global school-lunch initiative would draw children into schools, especially girls, who have in the past been excluded. Education has been shown to lower birth rates, increase human productivity and decrease the rate of HIV infection - three vital components needed to improve living conditions in the third world.

President Clinton, President Bush and Congress have all responded to the senators' plea. This year, Congress appropriated \$100 million for the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program. But to ensure its success, permanent funding must be included in the farm bill at \$300 million and increasing gradually in years ahead.

Today in schools across Africa, there are bags of grain labeled "World Food Program: Gift of the United States." Americans have every right to be proud of what we are doing to feed the world. There is no better foreign policy for the United States than feeding the hungry.

But millions of children are still hungry, and we can do more.

The French writer Romain Rolland defined a hero as "someone who does what he can."

20th anniversary

This is the first in a series of essays written in conjunction with the 20th anniversary of the World Food Prize. The prize was founded in 1986 by Dr. Norman Borlaug, the agricultural scientist from Cresco who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970 for his work to feed a hungry world.

The 2006 World Food Prize laureates will be honored in a 7 p.m. ceremony Thursday at the Capitol, broadcast live by Iowa Public Television.

It is an important moral challenge to remember as we develop legislation to do what we can - to do all we can - in the global fight to end hunger.

MARSHALL MATZ, formerly counsel to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, is chairman of the board, Friends of the World Food Program, and is a featured speaker during World Food Prize week in Des Moines.

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