

# Coalition pushes debt relief for poor countries as economic stimulus

WASHINGTON - With all that President-elect Barack Obama has facing his new administration regarding the economy, a coalition of religious, human rights and labor advocates hopes that one concern won't be relegated to the bottom of the list: debt relief for the world's poorest countries.

The Jubilee USA Network recognizes that debt relief's profile has declined dramatically from its high point just a few years ago. But the 80 organizations that make up the network know just as well that their advocacy work has kept the issue in front of Congress, the Bush administration and the World Bank, if not in the headlines.

The coalition takes its name from the Jewish tradition of forgiving debt every 50 years, as told in Chapter 25, Verse 10, of the Book of Leviticus: "This 50th year you shall make sacred by proclaiming liberty in the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you."

Neil Watkins, Jubilee USA's national coordinator, said the network will be encouraging U.S. officials in the new administration and in Congress to continue their commitments to poor countries at a time when funds for international aid may almost disappear.

"We have this challenge and opportunity," Mr. Watkins said. "In a time of scarcity when the budget is going to be directed to U.S. human needs we need to help leaders remember that we also have to think about those in the rest of the world.

"I think it's clear the crisis is going to affect developing countries," he added. "That's going to affect our moral leadership but also our security if this crisis makes life so much worse in developing countries. I think our challenge will be to make the political argument and marshal the constituency to say that a great nation can do

two things at once. We can solve the crisis at home, but we also have to take strong measures to help the rest of the world.”

Mr. Watkins points to the highly successful campaign that led the United States and the World Bank to craft plans canceling debt for 23 of the world’s 40 heavily indebted poor countries and reducing it for another 10 nations. Funds the countries would have used for debt payments are being used for health care, food, education, housing and other development programs, diminishing the impact of the global food crisis, he said.

Now Jubilee USA is looking to expand debt cancellation to the remaining 17 poorest nations. Mr. Watkins points to President-elect Obama’s co-sponsorship in 2008 of the Jubilee Act, which would promote wide relief to poor countries, and efforts by Vice President-elect Joseph Biden to champion the debt-relief cause during his time in the U.S. Senate.

Mr. Watkins also is buoyed by a plank in Obama’s campaign platform which called for a multilateral approach to reducing debt, allowing poor countries to keep more funds at home for development projects and basic social needs.

Although the Jubilee Act never came up for a vote before Congress closed for business in December, Jubilee USA’s member organizations are expecting the bill to be reintroduced early in the 111th Congress.

“We’re certainly optimistic,” Mr. Watkins said.

He and his colleagues are hopeful that the Jubilee Act will provide the framework for Obama to propose widening debt relief at the 2010 summit of the Group of Eight industrialized nations in Huntsville, Ontario.

The G-8 members are Russia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Great Britain and the United States.

Relief for storm-weary Haiti is one Jubilee USA’s biggest concerns. Despite being hit by a succession of hurricanes that led to devastating floods during the summer of 2008, Haiti continues making weekly \$1 million payments to the World Bank. Jubilee USA plans to push Obama during his first 100 days in the White House to ask the

World Bank to cancel the Caribbean country's payments, Mr. Watkins said.

More information about Jubilee USA Network's debt-relief work is available online at [www.jubileeusa.org](http://www.jubileeusa.org).