

Letter reminds leaders that U.S. economic efforts have global impact

WASHINGTON - The economic welfare of the people of the United States is "inextricably linked with the well-being of men, women and children across the globe," said a letter to President Barack Obama and congressional leaders from representatives of religious, development and business organizations.

"It is essential that the United States reject those policies that will worsen the impact of the current economic crisis on global economic growth and development, particularly with respect to poor nations, and work instead alongside the people of these nations to further their own sustainable development," said the March 20 letter.

Among the signers were Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace; David Lane, CEO of ONE, a grass-roots global anti-poverty program; and Peter M. Robinson, president of the U.S. Council for International Business.

The signers also included William A. Reinsch, president of the National Foreign Trade Council; the Rev. David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World; the Episcopal Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; and representatives of World Vision, Oxfam America, the Business Roundtable and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, among other organizations.

The letter noted increasing evidence of the effects of the economic crisis on developing countries as a result of declines in investment and export demand.

Africa is particularly at risk, it said, "because of its high poverty levels, fiscal instability and reliance on commodity exports. Within these countries, the most vulnerable populations will be the hardest hit. Already the crisis has pushed millions of additional people into poverty."

Of particular concern are efforts to close off the U.S. economy from the rest of the world, it said, adding that the lessons of history should inform U.S. actions.

In previous times of economic crisis, there has been “a tendency to seek to protect one’s own economy in ways that give preference to domestic markets and domestic industry,” it said. “Steps in this direction risk contravening existing U.S. commitments to our trading partners and may provoke similar behavior by other countries, leading to a downward spiral toward uncertainty and instability.”

The group recommended that the administration and Congress:

- Affirm U.S. support for the World Trade Organization’s Doha Development Agenda, to open markets for developed and developing countries.
- Urge the Group of 20 summit in London in April to reaffirm commitments made by the U.S. and other G-20 nations to reject protectionism and not to turn inward in times of financial uncertainty.
- Review and reform trade preference programs, ensuring they include programs to build economic capacity, paying special attention to the least developed countries.
- Reinforce commitments to increase development assistance by elevating global development in the national strategy and “establishing policy coherence” among U.S. offices and agencies that deal with trade, foreign and development policy, and climate change.

“Our nation is undergoing severe stress in terms of jobs, businesses and investment that is taking a daily toll on people,” the letter concluded. “Such problems should motivate us to seek solutions that reject destructive protectionism on the one hand and global indifference to the plight of the poor on the other.”