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One year on, vow to make poverty history in Africa has hollow ring

BY JONATHAN CLAYTON AND RICHARD BEESTON

Leadership failures and aid cuts mean little has improved since summit

::nobreak::KOFI ANNAN, the UN secretary general, is to chair an international group set up by Tony Blair to monitor pledges made to help Africa at last year's G8 summit, the Prime Minister will announce today.

Bob Geldof, the Live8 organiser, and President Obasanjo of Nigeria will also be on the Africa Progress Panel, which will be funded by Bill Gates.

Mr Blair will say that keeping track of the pledges is a "full-time job" and will insist that, while some are on track, there is still much more to do.

The panel will face a continent where in many places the outlook, from human rights to economics, is bleaker than it was a year ago. There is a huge gap between the declarations of the Gleneagles summiteers, the pleas of "Make Poverty History" demonstrators, and reality, according to a survey by *The Times*. While the awareness of the problem is greater, the aid flow has gone into reverse in some countries because donor nations have been "double-counting" the debt relief agreed.

"What they did at Gleneagles was long on political symbolism and short on practical help," said Professor William Easterly, an expert on aid at New York University and the author of the forthcoming book, *The White Man's Burden*.

"It was pure political theatre intended to make Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and Bono look like Africa's saviours," he said. "The whole subject has been quietly dropped from this year's G8 agenda."

While the West must shoulder some responsibility for Africa's dire plight, last year's commitments to help the continent were based on a pledge from African leaders for good governance and transparency.

Over the past year several African leaders have increased dictatorial powers while fresh allegations of huge corruption have emerged. Of the world's top ten failed states in the world in 2006, six are African. The continent has also been hit by adverse weather, killer diseases, inequitable trade terms and insufficient attention to helping the private sector.

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There have been some successes. A report by Oxfam this month found that debt relief was already having an impact on the ground. In Zambia the Government has used the money to increase spending on health and education, including offering free basic medical care to the poor.

In Ghana the money saved has been spent on infrastructure such as road-building. In Tanzania the extra cash has allowed the authorities to buy food for areas hit by drought.

Save the Children, however, said in a recent report that 800 children were dying every day across the continent because their families could not afford basic medical care.

Oxfam has identified one of the problems as “double-counting” by Western governments. The G8 nations promised to increase aid by \$50 billion, and on paper spending rose by \$21 billion or 37 per cent on the previous year; but some countries have been guilty of counting debt write-offs as new money for aid. Oxfam found that spending on aid in Africa actually went down in Britain by 2 per cent, France by 2 per cent and Germany by 9 per cent over the past year.

“What Africans want and need is access to micro loans, freedom from government bureaucracy and interference, ie corruption, support for grass roots initiatives and free press,” said Buchizya Mseteka, an independent analyst on Africa.

Keeping the focus on Africa beyond next month will be very challenging. This year’s G8 summit is hosted by President Putin and the Kremlin has made it clear that Africa will not be a priority.

Even Britain can be accused of hypocrisy. Alex Vines and Tom Cargill, British specialists on Africa, reported that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office had reduced its presence in Africa by 20 per cent in the past year and closed diplomatic missions in Lesotho, Swaziland and Madagascar as well as merging or downgrading posts.

Africa’s woes are also the result of its leaders failing to live up to their side of the Gleneagles agenda, which called for improved governance.

In Ethiopia Prime Minister Meles Zenawi — a member of Mr Blair’s Commission on Africa — was shunned by his former ally who cut off aid after security forces shot dead demonstrators in the aftermath of elections that the opposition claimed were rigged.

In Uganda President Yoweri Museveni — long hailed as one of a new breed of African leaders — rejected pressure from the West and changed the constitution so he could stand for a third and possibly fourth term. He easily won the ensuing elections, but only after twice jailing the opposition leader.

Britain and other donors, who have poured millions into anti-poverty programmes since he came to power in the late 1980s, were powerless in face of his insistence to be the only politician with “sufficient vision to lead the country”. He responded with an attack on colonial overlords dictating policies.

“If we cut off support, we only punish the people we are trying to help,” an official of the Department for International Development said. “Once again, our aid has just created a Frankenstein, but he can call our bluff and he knows it.”

The picture is less bleak in West Africa. In Nigeria elections for a new

leader are likely to go ahead and, after years of civil war, Liberia held its first democratic elections last year, voting in Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as the first woman president on the continent.

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