

StarTribune Editorial

Our perspective

Speed it up

A slow-mo approach to AIDS

When an earthquake devastates a country of millions, rescuers everywhere dash to free victims from the rubble. Within months, wreckage gives way to recovery — with the help of strangers from lands faraway.

That's how things work when calamity comes to call: The world's people reach out to each other. Yet

when it comes to the AIDS emergency, the reflexive rush into action turns into more of a relaxed amble.

It's hard to think otherwise, given how reluctant well-off nations seem to be to spend money to quell this epidemic. Without a doubt, the world's most effective AIDS-fighting vehicle is the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Launched just two years ago by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan and U.S. President George W. Bush, the fund funnels cash to countries ready to confront AIDS head-on.

A new study by George Soros' Open Society Institute explains just why the Global Fund is the smartest spender: It pools all the world's resources and insists that all parties in an AIDS-afflicted country — medical, religious, nonprofit, government — get together to coordinate tactics.

Though the fund has typically won praise, its cupboards have always been close to bare. Perhaps that's partly because the United States hasn't shown great fondness for the fund — devoting only a sliver of its anti-AIDS spending to it. Generous U.S. investment in an international program often creates the sort of eye-catching impetus that spurs other countries to give. But no such momentum has developed: U.S. contributions have been far smaller than expected. Though the fund was created in the hope of attracting up to \$10 billion annually, it has labored to muster much more than \$1 billion

a year — keeping its profile lamentably low.

What was grim is now looking grimmer, for next year the United States seems likely to slash its current-year Global Fund pledge of \$547

billion radically: The White House budget calls for only \$200 million. Perhaps even more worrisome,

the pace of donations from other countries has grown so sluggish that Randall Tobias, U.S. global AIDS coordinator, says he'll withhold the last \$120 million of this year's U.S. pledge unless other donors pitch in more.

Federal law limits the U.S. contribution to the Global Fund to 33 percent of its total. That's a silly stipulation — based neither on logic nor any identifiable principle of fairness. As the world's wealthiest nation, there's no question the United States must invest in the AIDS fight far more generously than other countries. And if others are failing to come through, it hardly makes sense for America to falter in their wake. U.S. responsibility will grow, not diminish, if some who should contribute to the Global Fund foolishly opt out.

No, Tobias should find a way around the threat to withhold — even if it means asking Congress to lift the 33 percent cap. There's nothing holy about that percentage — and something very sacred indeed about sharing enough of American resources to save the millions of lives now endangered by this scourge.

In just a few years, epidemiologists predict, containing AIDS will cost a good \$20 billion a year. That the administration feels comfortable spending so little on AIDS — an expected \$2.2 billion next year — is unconscionable in itself. That it is willing to withhold cash already promised to the fund with the most AIDS-fighting punch is a sheer disgrace.

AIDS with an Asian face