

Global poverty demonstration sets world record, despite lackluster U.S. showing

By Sarah Morrison

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The Guinness World Record for the largest mobilization of human beings was recently broken when 173 million people demanded that their governments eradicate extreme poverty around the world. But U.S. media barely noted the call and San Francisco's event had low attendance, suggesting an uphill struggle for the cause in the world's richest nation.

Millions gathered at more than 3,000 Stand Up, Take Action events in 120 countries Oct. 16-18 in an attempt to put pressure on governments to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, but less than 30 people gathered on the steps of San Francisco City Hall to support the movement.

Sup. John Avalos was one of the speakers at the event, organized by a coalition of local activist groups and student volunteers. Admitting that he was "expecting it to be a little bigger," Avalos said the event was just the start of what needed to be a much larger movement by the American people.

"There is a strange phenomenon occurring at the moment. It's as if people are a little bit asleep about the need to be active," Avalos told the Guardian. "Because we have an administration they view as being more supportive of human rights and economic and social justice, people are being lulled into thinking things will just get better."

Standing just a short walk away from the birth place of the United Nations, Avalos bought attention in his speech to the rich history San Francisco has in mobilizing social change. "We do the best to live up to it, but we have a long way to go. Around the world this is the time to uproot poverty — we try to provide a safety net, but it could be stronger."

The Stand Up, Take Action, End Poverty Now! campaign is in its fourth year and is organized by the UN Millennium Campaign in an attempt to raise awareness of the

Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a series of benchmarks designed to eradicate global poverty.

At the United Nations Millennium Development Summit in 2000, 189 world leaders promised to "end poverty by 2015." The eight goals include eliminating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-Oakland) has authored or coauthored every major piece of legislation dealing with global HIV/AIDS issues since she was elected to Congress. She told the Guardian that MDGs must be placed in context with poverty in America. "Sometimes people argue that we must look after our own first, but my position is that if you look at the eight Millennium goals, they all apply to our own country too," Lee said. "Look at the plight of people who are disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS in our country — especially in African American and Latino communities.

"With the economic downturn, poverty rates in America are soaring, putting more people into circumstances the MDGs focus on outside of America," she continued. "I think it really is important to make those connections."

Lee compared the foreclosure crisis and lack of regulation in the financial markets over the last eight to 10 years to the "wild West" and calls America's 47 million uninsured a "moral disgrace."

"It is about priorities and political will, and this will be determined by the voices of people saying it must be done," she said. "People have to push for these changes and remember that it didn't just stop with the election. We have to raise awareness while at the same time working on changing policy. Otherwise we can get stuck debating issues and not doing the work that has to be done to change these very deplorable conditions."

Sup. David Campos was the only other supervisor to speak at the Civic Center event. He said he is committed to the fight against global poverty and wants to see the government represent the values San Francisco was founded on.

"We need to shed light and bring attention to one of the largest issues facing the world today — severe poverty," Campos said. "I really believe that as a city, as a state, and as a country, we not only need to make sure we push the U.S. to follow the lead of other countries, but actually become a leader in making these Millennium goals a reality."

After the event, Campos told the Guardian: "It doesn't surprise me that more people

didn't show up to the event. But part of the task is to spread the word. San Francisco has been a leader in a number of these issues in the past, and I think we should play a key role in this one."

Campos said that one solution might be to put forward a resolution before the Board of Supervisors to support MDGs and have the city take a formal position on it.

"It is definitely something we are talking about to demonstrate San Francisco's commitment to the issue," he said. "A lot of people don't know about the goals, or the fact that the U.S. hasn't really made them a priority. We need to spread the word and let people know this kind of a movement is only going to be a success if people take it upon themselves to play a leadership role."

Brian Webster, a volunteer who organized the SF event, drew attention to the large number of supporters for the MDGs in California. More than 250,000 people have signed up for the One Campaign, a global NGO that partnered with the U.N. Millennium Campaign in the events.

"For campaigners, it is now a matter of trying to join together and identify vast strategies to communicate what needs to be done," Webster said. "We will continue to educate communities, politicians, and civic leaders in what can be done this month, in the next six months, and ultimately, in the next six years."

While the Bush administration rarely mentioned MDGs while in office, many activists believe President Barack Obama's public recognition of the goals at a recent U.N. summit demonstrates a change in American policy.

"In other countries, there has been more education and awareness about the goals. But here in America, it is almost like we are starting eight years late," said **Anita Sharma**, the North American director for the U.N. Millennium Campaign. "President Obama has said that the MDGs are American goals and has even talked about his plans for achieving them."

Also, despite the low numbers at the San Francisco event, Sharma says more than 190,000 people from North America participated in last weekend's campaign, an increase of more than 70,000 from last year's attempt.

"It's not like Americans don't care about global poverty — in fact we give more in charitable contributions than any other country in the world," she said. "It just takes quite a lot to get Americans into the streets and mobilized. There needs to be more education out there, that's all."

Ananya Roy, a UC Berkeley professor of city and regional planning and education director of the Blum Center for Developing Economies, says she doesn't think MDGs can be achieved worldwide by 2015. Even so, she stressed the important role they played in the framework of development.

Speaking at UC Berkeley's Stand Up and Take Action Event, she said: "The goals are important because they are seen as a new