

World poverty can be overcome through the actions of good people



BARB GUY

I helped Nelson Mandela get out of prison.

My efforts were a drop in the bucket, a drop in the ocean even, but along with millions of other people, I did make an effort and he did get out of prison; that's all I'm saying. Maybe you helped, too.

Musicians wrote songs about Nelson Mandela, DJs played them on the radio. Writers penned articles, college kids built replicas of South African shanties, churches pressured for policy change, banks and collectors dropped the Kruggerand. All over the planet people sent letters demanding Mandela's release and an end to the racist practice of apartheid.

Facing a worldwide groundswell of indignation, South Africa's President F.W. de Klerk released Mandela from Robben Island Prison in February 1990. In a

few years Mandela became the first democratically elected president of South Africa and won the Nobel Peace Prize. He is called the father of the new South Africa.

We squandered 27 years of Mandela's greatness while he was imprisoned. He retired from public life six years ago and he will be 87 next month, but he has come forward again to campaign for redress of Africa's problems when the world's Group of Eight leaders meet next week in Scotland. He sees an opportunity.

The heads of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States represent the world's major industrial democracies, the richest people on earth. The schism between the world's rich and the world's poor has never been wider. President Bush and his seven G-8 colleagues have a chance to focus on the 1 billion people in this world who subsist on less than \$1 per day.

Mandela is asking us to do something important before the summit begins on July 6. He knows, better than most, that a worldwide community of caring people, a community of drops-in-the-bucket, exists and that we really can create meaningful change.

Speaking before 22,000 people recently in London's Trafalgar Square, he said, "Sometimes it falls upon a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Millions of people in the world's poorest countries are trapped in the prison of poverty. It is time to set them free. The G-8 leaders, when they meet in Scotland in July, have already promised to focus on the issue of poverty, especially in Africa. The steps that they must take are very clear."

You can see a BBC News video of Mandela's entire speech at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4232603.stm.

Here's Mandela's wish list:

Give more and better aid - money, medicine, food, education; sidestep corrupt governments by channeling funds through non-governmental aid groups.

Cancel debt - the world's poorest countries spend more on debt interest payments to wealthy countries than they receive in aid.

Ensure trade justice - the global trade system is dizzyingly unfair; it needs an overhaul.

We got a great start on debt cancellation on June 11 when the world's most powerful finance ministers agreed to cancel what President Bush characterized as the "crippling debt burden" held

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by 14 African countries, but nearly all African countries need relief. This recent action, while crucial, erased only 1/6th of the African debt.

Some of the musicians who helped free Mandela from prison and abolish apartheid are helping again. They are pitching in to host a suite of concerts all across the globe on July 2. But the campaign is bigger than a group of scruffy musicians and one distinguished retired statesman. It's sufficiently broad-based to put Snoop Dogg and Pat Robertson on the same team; both of them are rallying their constituencies. It also includes Save the Children, Oxfam, CARE, Habitat for Humanity, the Salvation Army, UNICEF and scores of medical and church groups. In all, the participants include many hundreds of organizations.

This massive movement's goal is to get regular people fired up again, like when the world called for an end to apartheid. It's interesting that no one is asking us for money. The goal is simply to get us to contact our leaders before July 6, to ask them to enact Mandela's list: Give more and better aid, ensure trade justice and cancel debt to say that we want a new chance for Africa.

The eight people in that one room in Scotland, and their advisers, can do something amazing if they set their minds to it. The idea is to encourage them to act with compassion.

So here is another opportunity for people to make an effort that can change the world. As Mandela, the man freed by the actions of caring people around the globe, says, "Like slavery and apartheid, poverty is not natural; it is man-made and can be overcome by the action of human beings."

Why wouldn't we try?

Barb Guy is a frequent contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.