

## IMF Comes to Aid of Ebola-ravaged Countries

By Michael Sean Winters

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These days, the acronym “IMF” and the words “social justice” do not often appear in the same sentence, unless the sentence is addressing the IMF’s unwillingness to adopt policies that help achieve social justice. Today is different.

The IMF announced it is providing new funding to pay off the debt it holds in countries affected by the Ebola outbreak. The model they are using is akin to that adopted in the wake of the earthquake in Haiti. In both instances, desperately poor countries, beset by natural tragedies, could not simultaneously recover from those tragedies and service their foreign debt. The IMF did the right thing, recognizing that kicking a country already crippled did not make sense economically and offends the most basic understandings of social justice.

**“This aid is so vital for the countries affected by Ebola,” said Eric LeCompte, Executive Director of the religious anti-poverty organization Jubilee USA Network. “Now we have a permanent debt relief vehicle for when the poorest countries face certain crises. Essentially, a global social safety net is now in place to protect the least developed countries when they experience disasters.”**

The dollar amounts involved are not large. At the time of the Haiti earthquake, that country had about \$1 billion in outstanding foreign debt. To put it into perspective, that is considerably less than the \$35 billion increase above current spending caps in the Defense Department budget for 2016 just proposed by President Obama. Guinea, one of the countries hit by Ebola, spent more on servicing its foreign debt than it did on public health the year before the Ebola outbreak.

International economics and finance are complicated. It is shocking that so many people live in poverty throughout the world while we Americans celebrate the fact that the price of gas is going down, so we have more money in our pockets for consumer spending on important things, like new cars and new iPads and new clothes. The conversion of Western lifestyles which were a hallmark of Saint Pope John Paul II’s social encyclicals is a conversion still in the offing. It will come, I fear, only when it is forced upon us, not by any pangs of conscience about the sufferings of others.

**The IMF’s decision did not fall out of the sky. I have written before about the wonderful work of the small faith-based group Jubilee USA, which lobbied hard for the debt-relief package for Haiti and proposed that model for the countries affected by Ebola. A month ago, LeCompte said, “The IMF’s debt relief fund was the catalyst that led to debt relief for one of the poorest countries in the world [Haiti]. Now, as we look to Ebola-stricken West Africa, we see the same fund can tackle debt in some of the world’s poorest countries again.” Now, as then, the group is also calling for aid to the West African nations to come in the form of grants, not loans, so that these countries are not saddled with a new round of debt.**

**There is not a lot of good news around the globe these days. And, Lord knows that Ebola was not good news. But, if, as LeCompte points out, the world community understands that it must re-shape the landscape of debt in the face of horrible human suffering, that is one step, a significant step, towards a more humane world.**