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Bush Offers Plan to Help Mothers Avoid Passing H.I.V. to Babies

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With both Republicans and Democrats in Congress urging him to increase spending to fight global AIDS, President Bush announced a \$500 million plan today to prevent expectant mothers from passing the AIDS virus to their babies.

More than 2,000 infants are infected with the human immunodeficiency virus every day during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding, despite the widespread availability of cheap antiretroviral medicines that greatly reduce transmission of the virus from mother to child. The White House said the new money, which includes \$200 million already set aside by Congress, will provide treatment to a million women a year over the next five years. The goal is to reduce the number of infected babies by 40 percent in a dozen African nations and the Caribbean.

“Medical science gives us the power to save these young lives,” Mr. Bush said at a morning ceremony in the Rose Garden of the White House. “Conscience demands that we do so.”

Today’s announcement comes as Mr. Bush is preparing to meet next week in Canada with leaders of the Group of 8, a conference of industrialized nations; aid to Africa is high on the agenda. The administration has also been under pressure to demonstrate its commitment to impoverished countries in the wake of a much-publicized visit to Africa by Treasury Secretary Paul O’Neill and Bono, the Irish rock star who has made global poverty a cause.

Among advocates for people with AIDS, reaction to today’s announcement was mixed. Some praised Mr. Bush, among them Mark Isaac, an official of the Elisabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, who said the president showed “real leadership.”

By drawing women into clinics for counseling, testing and treatment, Mr. Isaac said the new program would “put in place a simple infrastructure” that could be expanded to include entire communities. “Mother-to-child is the stepping stone to comprehensive care,” he said.

But others denounced the plan, saying it falls far short of the global need. Paul Davis, a representative of the Health Gap Coalition, a nonprofit group dedicated to increasing access to medicines for patients overseas, called the program “a pretty bald attempt to get favorable headlines.”

Noting that Congress has already appropriated \$200 million for the program, and that the rest will not be available until 2004, Mr. Davis added, “They are claiming 500 million bucks, but that is claiming credit for monies that were passed by the United States Congress only over the strenuous objections of the White House.”

The White House has budgeted \$988 million for global AIDS this year, and plans to increase spending to \$1.1 billion next year. But for months, a bipartisan coalition of lawmakers has been appealing to Mr. Bush to spend even more. Among them were two prominent Republican senators, Bill Frist of Tennessee and Jesse Helms of North Carolina, who introduced legislation calling specifically for a program similar to the one Mr. Bush unveiled today.

The Frist-Helms measure would have made the \$500 million available immediately, as part of an emergency spending bill for this year. But two weeks ago, when the Senate took up the spending measure, the White House persuaded Senator Frist to reduce the amount to \$200 million -- the amount Congress ultimately approved.

In an interview today, the senator said he was satisfied with the outcome. “This will save lives,” he said.