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Congress Awakens to AIDS With a Convert's Zeal By SHERYL GAY STOLBERG

Two decades into the global AIDS epidemic, an unlikely alliance of lawmakers is pressing President Bush to increase spending by hundreds of millions of dollars this year to help foreign nations grapple with the disease.

The Bush administration has budgeted \$780 million for the global AIDS fight this year. On Thursday, however, Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee voted to add \$200 million in global AIDS money to an emergency measure for domestic security and military spending. The White House had not asked for the money.

Next week, the Senate Appropriations Committee is to vote on its version of the emergency spending bill and will consider adding as much as \$700 million for global AIDS.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers predict the total will be \$500 million when the House and Senate bills are reconciled, which would mean nearly \$1.3 billion to fight the disease globally. The money is to be allocated by Sept. 30, with more likely next year.

"It took tens of millions of people being infected and dying before our political system woke up to those realities," said the economist Jeffrey D. Sachs, who recently served as chairman of a World Health Organization panel that examined the economic impact of AIDS. "But there is no doubt it is waking up now."

Among those who have undergone an awakening is Representative Richard A. Gephardt, the House minority leader, who talks with passion about a trip he took to Africa in 1999. Mr. Gephardt, a Missouri Democrat, led a Congressional delegation to South Africa, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, intending to learn about economic and political conditions. Instead, he said, he came away with a single message: "AIDS, AIDS, AIDS, AIDS. I came away knowing and believing that this is the moral issue of our time."

Now, Mr. Gephardt is calling for the United States to spend \$2 billion a year to fight the AIDS pandemic. A few years ago, he would have been laughed out of official Washington for such a suggestion. Today, however, Mr. Gephardt has a surprising partner in his fight: Senator Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican, who also wants more money, though not billions, for global AIDS.

Mr. Helms, 80, has frequently denounced foreign aid as "a rathole" and has infuriated gay people by asserting that homosexuals were to blame for the spread of AIDS in this country. Yet as he prepares to retire, the senator is calling for \$500 million for medicines that would prevent expectant mothers infected with the human immunodeficiency virus from passing it on to their babies.

The reasons for the change in Congressional sentiment are varied, and even proponents of more spending disagree on how much money is needed and precisely where it should go. Some lawmakers have come to embrace the disease as a children's issue, citing predictions that the number of AIDS orphans will increase to 40 million in 10 years.

Sandra Thurman, the former top AIDS official in the Clinton administration who runs a nonprofit group, the International AIDS Trust, said she began pitching the concept to Congress as early as 1999.

"If you can't get Democrats and Republicans to agree on everything," Ms. Thurman said, "you can get them to agree on children."

Others, like Senator Joseph R. Biden Jr., Democrat of Delaware, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, see the disease as a national security threat, creating political and economic instability that will breed the next generation of terrorists. Former President Bill Clinton, who has made combating global AIDS a priority of his ex-presidency, has made this argument in a series of speeches.

Some lawmakers, notably Mr. Helms, have credited Bono, the Irish rock star who has become something of a cult figure in Washington with his pleas for more aid to fight global poverty and disease. Some credit Kofi Annan, the United Nations secretary general, who last year called for a new global fund to fight AIDS. The

fund awarded its first grants last month.

Still others, like Mr. Gephardt, have witnessed the devastation up close and cannot quite get over what they saw.

“It is a life-changing experience,” Mr. Gephardt said, “to go there and confront physically what it means to have 22 million people H.I.V. positive without any drugs, without any real infrastructure to deliver drugs. We went to a hospital in Johannesburg and we went through pediatrics wards and we learned that about half the babies born in the hospital are H.I.V. positive. I asked, ‘How long will these children live?’ Some were in preemie incubators. And they said, ‘Less than a year.’”

Infection with the AIDS virus is now the leading cause of death in sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNAIDS, an arm of the World Health Organization. On Friday, the agency reported that 6,000 young people age 15 to 24 and 2,000 children under 15 were infected with H.I.V. every day.

Yet the agency said medicines to prevent mother-to-child transmission of the virus reached fewer than 5 percent of women in sub-Saharan Africa.

The White House says the United States is providing nearly half of all international financing to fight the epidemic. A spokesman, Scott McClellan, describes the United States as “a world leader” in the fight against global AIDS.

But advocates for people with AIDS say that in light of the staggering tally of H.I.V. infections and AIDS deaths, the administration and Congress are not doing nearly enough. They note that Secretary Annan has called for \$10 billion in annual global AIDS spending and say the United States’ share should be one-quarter of that, or \$2.5 billion, delivered immediately.

“Three million Africans are going to die this year,” said Dr. Paul Zeitz, executive director of the Global AIDS Alliance, an advocacy group in Washington. “I want \$10 billion this year. I don’t buy this incremental response. I think it’s a hoax.”

Yet even as he denounced the federal government’s lack of “political will to stop global AIDS,” Dr. Zeitz

allowed that sentiment in Congress was beginning to shift.

“It’s a clear link to the war on terrorism,” he said, noting that the Central Intelligence Agency had reported that countries heavily affected by AIDS are susceptible to political instability. “That’s why people might have perked up about it.”

Among the most surprising converts to the global AIDS cause is Mr. Helms. Those who know him well say he was heavily influenced not only by Bono, but also by Samaritan’s Purse, a Christian relief organization in his home state that is run by the Rev. Franklin Graham. The group recently held a conference in Washington and invited Mr. Helms to speak.

The senator, the ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, is not running for reelection this year and is currently recovering from heart surgery. He told Mr. Graham’s group he was ashamed he had not done more, said Lester Munson, a Republican spokesman for the Foreign Relations Committee.

“He put it in very personal terms,” Mr. Munson said, “in a religious, Christian context.” Senator Bill Frist, the Tennessee Republican and a heart surgeon, said Mr. Helms’s remarks were raising awareness among his Senate colleagues.

“He has opened their eyes to a plague of biblical proportions,” Senator Frist said.

Like Mr. Gephardt, Senator Frist said his eyes were opened by seeing the epidemic firsthand. He volunteers frequently for medical missions in Africa and has worked as a surgeon in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, often operating on people infected with H.I.V.

“When I’m in the hospital taking care of people,” he said, “I’m with the nurses, the doctors, the villagers, the tribal people. I know what’s going on.” President Bush has said that before he devotes more money for global AIDS, he wants assurances that it will be well spent.

Senator Frist says he will introduce legislation in the form of a strategic plan that will meet Mr. Bush’s demands.

“My goal, by the time I get out of here,” Senator Frist said, referring to the Senate, “is to look back and say, we have reversed the tide.”