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## **Condom Distribution is a Deadly Ideology for Africa**

by Douglas A. Sylva

According to the New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof, President Bush's international AIDS policy threatens to kill "millions" of Africans. In his latest column, Kristof contends that, "President Bush is focusing his program against AIDS in Africa on sexual abstinence and marital fidelity, relegating condoms to a distant third. It's the kind of well-meaning policy that bubbles up out of a White House prayer meeting but that will mean a lot of unnecessary deaths on the ground in Africa."

Let us leave aside Kristof's condescension towards President Bush as a believing Christian (Bush does not make rational policy choices, rather his policies merely "bubble up out of" prayer meetings). But the basic charge must be addressed: Is it possible that condoms are the solution to the international AIDS epidemic, and that deviating from the condoms approach will result in more infections and more deaths?

A little background is necessary. Since the beginning of the AIDS disaster in Africa, the Western response has been almost solely focused on the condom. Condoms have flooded the continent in such massive waves that total numbers are difficult to estimate: probably more than 700 million provided each year by the UN, the EU, and the US, along with countless millions more donated by like-minded non-governmental organizations and sold outright by "social marketing" organizations.

Thus, to make his case, Kristof would first need to explain why condoms have not so far worked. UN documents acknowledge that Africans do not use condoms much more frequently now than they ever did before, and certainly have not begun to use them, and use them correctly, almost 100 percent of the time, which would be necessary if condoms were to lower AIDS infection rates.

Indeed, Kristof admits that "Encouraging more use of male and female condoms might reduce such [AIDS] tragedies, for there's a disdain for condoms in many countries that social marketing might change." Kristof must, then, inform his readers how many decades of "tragedies" he is willing to accept before he will question the efficacy of condom "encouragement."

Next, Kristof needs to explain Uganda. Uganda is the only major success in sub-Saharan Africa, the only country where AIDS rates have been contained. According to a USAID report on Uganda, it was abstinence and fidelity, not condoms, which worked in Uganda. The report states that, "the effect of HIV prevention in Uganda (particularly partner reduction) during the past decade appears to have had a similar impact as a potential medical vaccine of 80 percent efficacy," and "the most important determinant of the reduction in HIV incidence in Uganda appears to be a decrease in multiple sexual partnerships and networks."

So what does Kristof say about Uganda? He simply, astoundingly, claims it as a condoms success, saying that "condoms have played a crucial role" in Uganda. Kristof must know of the USAID report, and the influential book, "Rethinking AIDS Prevention, Learning from Successes in the Developing World," written by Harvard scientist Edward C. Green, that corroborates and expands upon the USAID report. Neither are mentioned, let alone refuted. Nor is any source given for Kristof's claim that condoms worked in Uganda.

So who is the true ideologue, the person willing to risk millions of Africans in order to prop up his beliefs? Perhaps it is President Bush who is acting rationally by building his social policy on best practices, and Kristof whose beliefs merely "bubble up," in this case out of the worldview of the international elites.

In fact, Green ends his book with the same kind of condemnation of Kristof's mentality

that Kristof leveled against Bush: "If it turns out that the findings from Uganda and other countries considered here are confirmed, and we have failed to promote the right messages, then it is not too far-fetched to say that millions of lives could have been saved and yet were not."

Kristof must have timed his column to have the greatest possible impact on next week's Commission on Population and Development at the United Nations, where AIDS policy will be a major topic. No doubt diplomats there will welcome his column, and as they plan for many more years of condom distribution, congratulate themselves on their own enlightenment.