

Kofi challenges Canada

By PARKER MITCHELL

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On the University of Calgary campus recently, a crowd gathered to witness an odd sight -- two combatants wearing giant, padded, sumo-wrestler suits. Pinned to the back of one was the label "Challenger." The defending champion: "World Hunger." The scene was staged repeatedly across Canada, as we members of Engineers Without Borders tried to raise awareness of the challenges facing poor people around the world -- and to offer Canadians a chance to strike a blow against world hunger.

Canada has its problems, including the need to ensure that our health-care and education systems function well and that our cities are vibrant, safe places to live. But people elsewhere face far bigger problems: One billion people drink unsafe water; 800 million people go hungry every day. In the five minutes it takes you to read this, 100 children will die.

When he visited Canada last week, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan posed a challenge to Canadians -- to help wrestle to the ground the giant problems dominating the world's poorest countries. People trust Canada, perhaps more for what we haven't done than what we have done. We aren't imperialistic, and we aren't former colonizers. In the second half of the 20th century, Canadians defined our international role through peacekeeping, and our success let us punch above our international weight. In 1968, Lester Pearson, the father of peacekeeping, chaired a worldwide panel on reducing global poverty; the Pearson commission urged us not to

forget the inhuman conditions under which two-thirds of the human race was struggling.

Here's what those struggles mean in the life of one man. Yen is a farmer in Bolgatanga, northern Ghana, where the rains come for three months of the year. During the other nine months, his land is scoured by the harmattan, a dry wind from Egypt that sweeps across the Sahara and sucks up any moisture in its path. Yen has

just three months to plant and harvest his crops -- cassava, yams, perhaps some rice. When the rains are late or sparse, he knows that he will not have enough food for his family at the end of the year. He will be forced to decide: Keep his final few seeds to sow next year's fields, and have his family go hungry, or eat the seeds and -- then what?

For Engineers Without Borders, development means helping people like Yen gain access to improved irrigation or small-scale food processing so that his harvest doesn't spoil before he needs it. We've been involved in repairing rice-milling facilities, designing palm-oil expellers and building small-scale tomato-pasteurizing machines so that crops don't rot in the fields while some people go hungry.

Four years ago the United Nations agreed to a framework to address poverty -- the eight Millennium Development Goals. Among them: To cut in half the number of people living on less than \$2 a day, those who go hungry, and those without access to safe water.

These goals are both exciting and sad. They're exciting because they focus resources on the most pressing issues -- and sad because we are far, far from meeting them, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. There, according to the UN, only one child in three finishes primary school. Based on current trends, it will take us 150 years, not 15, to cut hunger and child mortality rates in half.

The world lacks leadership in helping ensure Yen's children can go to school, be healthy, have a chance. That's why Mr. Annan challenged Canadians: "Yours must be a leading role in a renewed global effort to deliver what the world has promised to its neediest citizens."

We Canadians must decide if we want to play a role as individuals in helping people like Yen. Take coffee -- of the \$1.50 we pay for a cup, as little as three pennies goes to the struggling farmer who grew the beans. Are we willing to pay slightly more for fair-trade coffee, or food, or clothes that give poor people a chance to work their way out of poverty? Do the stores that we shop at know we want to make such choices? Do the corporations that employ us know that we want them to incorporate sustainable-development

values in their daily decisions? As employees -- and shareholders -- of these corporations, we can reward the leaders and punish the laggards.

We can also encourage Ottawa to put the Millennium Development Goals front and centre in Canada's international strategy. It's not rocket science, and there is no silver bullet -- simply more aid, more effectively targeted; untied aid; and policy coherence around trade, agriculture and intellectual property.

Meanwhile, Engineers Without Borders will keep finding ways to dramatize the development problems confronting the world. We'd be proud, as Canadians, to think that when world hunger is defeated, the challenger was wearing a Maple Leaf.

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