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AID FOR AFRICA

'Make Poverty History' Protest Draws Tens of Thousands

By Ron DePasquale
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EDINBURGH, Scotland — Waves of anti-poverty protesters ringed Scotland's capital Saturday to demand more aid, debt relief and fair trade for poor nations, hoping to pressure world leaders ahead of this week's Group of 8 summit.

Colorfully costumed activists, parents carrying children on their backs and African immigrants massed together for the raucous "Make Poverty History" march, which lasted more than five hours. More than 200,000 people marched and gathered at the Meadows, a downtown park, police said.

Musicians from around the world, including British folk singer Billy Bragg, sang politically charged songs, while activists and religious leaders urged crowds to demonstrate throughout the week of the G-8 summit, when leaders of eight of the wealthiest countries will meet north of the city.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the summit host, has placed African aid at the top of the agenda, along with global warming.

The Make Poverty History coalition, consisting of aid groups such as Oxfam and Christian Aid, coincided with Live 8 concerts around the world on a day that focused global attention on the developing world's plight. People in Edinburgh watched the concerts on a giant video screen.

Along the march, the sound of trumpets, drums and whistles mixed with chants like "Drop, drop, drop the debt!" A band of Kenyan immigrants — with "Fair Trade for Kenya" scrawled on their white T-shirts — danced and sang in Swahili, at one point linking together in a circle.

"We want fair trade — no more subsidies for American and European farmers," said Chege Wanjihia, a 31-year-old healthcare worker. "We don't want handouts. We're tired of handouts."

Brian Chiwara, a Zimbabwean immigrant in a synthetic leopard-skin cloak and feather headdress, said more aid should also bring added scrutiny of African leaders. He stood by a flag that read "Make Mugabe History," a reference to Zimbabwe's leader, Robert Mugabe, who has drawn global scorn for stifling political opposition.

"Just giving money to African governments without holding them accountable only enriches the ruling party," he said. "The U.K. and U.S. should empower Zimbabweans and help us become a democracy."

Aid organizations are working harder in African nations to make sure donated money is properly spent, said Make Poverty History coordinator Adrian Lovett of Oxfam. "We'll go there and count the number of schoolbooks in the schools if that's what it takes," he said.

At the rally, Bragg borrowed Bob Marley's song "One Love" and changed the chorus to "Let's drop the debt and it will be all right." Scottish Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien read a message from Pope Benedict XVI calling for the people of rich nations to "urge their leaders to fulfill the pledges made to reduce world poverty, especially in Africa."

British Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown endorsed the march at a Christian Aid rally and called the fight against poverty "the greatest moral crusade of our times."

"You are right to demand trade justice and you are right to say instead of being impoverished, Africa's poorest communities should be empowered," he said.

Edinburgh residents were supportive of the protesters' cause, if a bit nervous.

Some stores along the parade route were boarded closed, but many remained open.

"Hopefully they'll be only peaceful and joyful," said Robert Coulter, a 27-year-old barber. "But just in case they're not, we're putting up a 'Power to the People' sign."

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