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## Torture by Worms

By Nicholas D. Kristof

JIMMA, Ethiopia—Presidents are supposed to be strong, and on his latest visit to Africa Jimmy Carter proved himself strong enough to weep.

The first stop of Mr. Carter's four-nation African trip was Ghana, where he visited his projects to wipe out the Guinea worm, a horrendous two-foot-long parasite that lives inside the body and finally pops out, causing excruciating pain.

Mr. Carter was shaken by the victims he met, including a 57-year-old woman with a Guinea worm coming out of her nipple.

"She and her medical attendants said she had another coming out her genitals between her legs, and one each coming out of both feet," Mr. Carter added. "And so she had four Guinea worms emerging simultaneously."

"Little 3-, 4- and 5-year-old children were screaming uncontrollably with pain" because of the worms emerging from their flesh, Mr. Carter said. "I cried, along with the children."

We tend to think of human rights in terms of a right to vote, a right to free speech, a right to assembly. But a child should also have a right not to suffer agony because of a worm that is easily preventable, as well as a right not to go blind because of a lack of medication that costs a dollar or two, even a right not to die for lack of a \$5 mosquito net.

As president, Mr. Carter put the issue of human rights squarely on the national agenda. Now Mr. Carter argues—and he's dead right—that we conceive of human rights too narrowly as political and civil rights, and that we also need to fight for

the human right of children to live healthy lives.

He has led the way in waging that battle. Because of Mr. Carter's two-decade battle against Guinea worm disease, it is expected to be eradicated worldwide within the next five years. It will be the first ailment to be eliminated since smallpox in 1977, and it has become a race between the worm and the ex-president to see who outlasts the other.

"I'm determined to live long enough to see no cases of Guinea worm anywhere in the world," Mr. Carter said as he walked in blue jeans through a couple of villages in a remote corner of southwestern Ethiopia, the third country of his African tour.

After leaving the White House, Mr. Carter ended up "adopting" diseases like Guinea worm disease, river blindness, elephantiasis, trachoma and schistosomiasis that afflict the world's most voiceless people. These are horrific diseases that cause unimaginable suffering, yet they rarely get attention, treatment or research funding because their victims are impoverished and invisible.

When Mr. Carter met with Mohammad Zia ul-Haq, then Pakistan's president, President Zia had never heard of Guinea worm and didn't know it existed in Pakistan. Nor did his health minister. But after Mr. Carter put the issue on the agenda, Pakistan worked energetically

with the Carter Center to eliminate the parasite in that country.

The villages here in Ethiopia that Mr. Carter visited cradle a fast-moving creek, making a lovely image of thatched huts and bubbling water. But the creek is home to the black flies whose bites spread the parasite that causes river blindness, leading to unbearable itching and often eventually to blindness.

"It's almost impossible to imagine the suffering of people with river blindness," Mr. Carter said as he traipsed through the village beside his wife, Rosalynn.

Already, Mr. Carter's campaign is making huge progress against the disease.

Kemeru Befita, a woman washing her clothes in the creek near Mr. Carter, told me that two of her children had caught river blindness in the last couple of months. After a visit to the witch doctor didn't help, she took them to a clinic where—thanks to Mr. Carter's program—they received medicine that killed the baby worms. They are two of the nearly 10 million people to whom the Carter Center gave medication last year alone, who won't go blind.

At the end of the day, this one-term president who left office a pariah in his own party will transform the lives of more people in more places over a longer period of time than any other recent president. And I hope that he can also transform our conception of human rights, so that we show an interest not only in the human rights of people suffering from the oppression of dictators, but also from the even more brutal tyranny of blindness, malaria and worms.

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## Let's Start a War, One We Can Win

AFETA, Ethiopia—They were two old men, one arriving by motorcade with bodyguards and the other groping blindly as he shuffled on a footpath with a stick, but for a moment the orbits of Jimmy Carter and Mekonnen Leka intersected on this remote battlefield in southern Ethiopia.

Mr. Mekonnen, who thinks he may be 78, is a patient in Mr. Carter's war on river blindness. He is so blind that he rarely leaves the house any more, but on this occasion he staggered to the village clinic to get a treatment for the worms inside him.

His skin is mottled because the worms cause ferocious itching, especially when they become more active at night. He and other victims scratch until they are bloodied and their skin is partly worn away.

Ultimately the worms travel to the eye, where they often destroy the victim's sight.

Ethiopia has the largest proportion of blind people in the world, 1.2 percent, because of the combined effects of river blindness and trachoma. As in many African countries, the wrenching emblem of poverty is a tiny child leading a blind beggar by a stick.

As Mr. Mekonnen waited on a bench by the clinic, there was a flurry of activity, and an Ethiopian announced in the Amharic language that "a great elder" had arrived. Then Mr. Mekonnen heard voices speaking a foreign language and a clicking of cameras, and finally the whirlwind around Mr. Carter moved on.

"Do you know who that was?" I asked Mr. Mekonnen.

"I couldn't see," he replied.

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By Nicholas D. Kristof

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"Have you ever heard of Jimmy Carter?"

"No."

Yet in remote places like this, former President Carter, at 82, is leading a private war on disease that should inspire and shame President Bush and other world leaders into joining. It's not just that Mr. Carter's wars have been more successful than Mr. Bush's; Mr. Carter is also rehabilitating the image of the U.S. abroad and transforming the lives of the world's most wretched peoples.

On the previous night, Mr. Mekonnen had slept under a mosquito net for the first time in his life, as part of a Carter initiative to wipe out malaria and elephantiasis in this region. And Mr. Mekonnen now uses an outhouse as a result of a Carter Center initiative to build 350,000 outhouses in rural Ethiopia to defeat blindness from trachoma.

Mr. Carter has almost managed to wipe out one horrific ailment—Guinea worm—and is making great strides against others, including river blindness and elephantiasis. In this area, people are taking an annual dose of a medicine called Mectizan—donated by Merck, which deserves huge credit—that prevents itching and blindness.

Mectizan also gets rid of intestinal worms, leaving Ethiopian villagers stronger and more able to work or attend school. Among adults, the deworming revives sex drive, so some people have named their children Mectizan.

Mr. Carter's private campaign against the diseases of poverty, put together with pennies and duct tape, is a model of what our government could do. Imagine if the U.S. resolved that it would wipe out malaria and elephantiasis (both are spread by mosquitoes, so a combined campaign makes sense). What if we celebrated science not by trying to go to Mars but by extinguishing malaria? What if we tried to burnish America's image abroad not only with press releases and propaganda broadcasts, but also with a bold campaign against disease?

So I wish that President Bush could visit villages like this and see what Mr. Carter has accomplished as a private individual. Mr. Bush, to his great credit, has financed a major campaign against AIDS that will save nine million lives, and he is also increasing spending against malaria—but not nearly as energetically as he is increasing the number of troops in Iraq. So I asked Mr. Carter whether President Bush should be pushing not for a possible war with Iran, but for a war on malaria.

"That would certainly be my preference," he said. "I thought the war in Iraq was one of the worst mistakes our country ever made, and we're possibly about to make an even worse mistake by precipitating a war with Iran. But I would like to see us shift away from war being a high priority, to diplomacy and benevolent causes."

So, President Bush, how about if we as a nation join Mr. Carter's war on diseases that afflict the world's poorest peoples—and are one reason they are so poor. That's a war that would unite Americans, not divide them. Come on, Mr. Bush, sound the trumpets!