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## EDITORIAL *On the U.N. Summit*

# Obama's AIDS showdown

Since the AIDS virus surfaced in San Francisco nearly 30 years ago, enormous advances have occurred. Governments woke up to the crisis and spent billions on treatment and education, actions that have flattened the once-hopeless upward curve of new infections.

There's a new turning point ahead, one that has put the White House squarely on notice. Will President Obama continue to ramp up the fight the way his predecessor George W. Bush did? Since taking office — and facing a crushing recession — Obama has moved slowly in the AIDS fight. While still spending billions, Obama hasn't increased budgets as he once pledged.

AIDS remains a deadly peril with some 34 million infected worldwide, most of them in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2003 Bush launched a U.S.-led initiative, known by its initials as PEPFAR, that poured \$15 billion into a five-year campaign. He later boosted it to \$48 billion for the next five years, an amount that Obama said he would increase.

Now it's showtime for the White House. Later this month, the president will announce whether he will continue this nation's dominant role in the fight. He's due to attend a U.N. conference in New York, which begins Sept. 20, and announce whether he will follow through on a pledge of \$6 billion over three years to the Global Fund that targets TB, malaria and AIDS.

The money is important but so is Obama's leadership. Under Global Fund rules, other industrialized countries will double what Washington puts in. The \$6 billion from Obama will reap another \$12 billion from big-country donors.

The showdown is the latest test of Obama's resolve on AIDS pledges. No question, he's committed, but to



Saul Loeb / AFP / Getty Images

**President Obama has yet to deliver on his promise to increase funding for the U.S.-led global initiative known as PEPFAR.**

what degree? This past year, he rolled out a new initiative in the domestic fight, pledging to cut infections by 25 percent and widening the use of antiretroviral drugs which lessen symptoms and extend life. The plan redirected existing money to these goals, but critics said it needed millions of dollars more to work.

It's much the same on a global scale. His words and actions carry weight, with the power to push other governments to action — or inaction.

His defenders point to economic realities that make ever-larger expenditures a hard sell. Also, there are rivalries in AIDS care between providers of treatment, researchers

and educators. At a yearly gathering of 20,000 AIDS experts in Vienna, former President Bill Clinton defended Obama against claims he was backsliding. Here in San Francisco the dissatisfaction has led to billboards in Muni Metro stations and street protests criticizing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for not spending stimulus money on AIDS drugs — even though she was one of the earliest and most effective voices in getting Washington to take action.

Obama has a chance to make a clear and unequivocal message. This country must continue to lead in battling AIDS both overseas and at home.