

Bono Urges Action for Africa at Awards Dinner

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Robert Lebowitz

The Simon Wiesenthal Center last night presented its Humanitarian Laureate Award to Bono, frontman for the rock group U2, at its Eastern office's annual awards dinner. The Center honored the Irish musician for "his keen sense of social justice and his tireless efforts on behalf of the underprivileged and disenfranchised of the world."

The awards dinner was also attended by CEO of Universal Music Group Doug Morris, ABC news anchor Elizabeth Vargas, and economist Jeffrey Sachs, whom Bono has consulted on issues related to debt relief to Africa.

In his acceptance speech, Bono exhorted the audience to use the power of American democracy to assist suffering people in failing African countries.

"Next year, 2.5 million Africans will die for stupid reasons," Bono stated. "They won't die because the drugs are not available; they won't die because it's too expensive to get drugs to them; they'll die because it's difficult to get drugs to them. And, yet, we can get cold, fizzy drinks to the farthest reaches of the world.

"I truly believe God is on His knees, begging us to do something. We cannot choose the benefits of globalization without the responsibilities. The AIDS emergency will be much more difficult the more we leave it alone."

Bono dismissed the notion that Americans are isolated from the despair and crises of Africa, stating that September 11 dispelled the idea that the United States will be unaffected by the problems of struggling nations. "The crisis in Africa presents an opportunity for this country. The war on terror is bound up with the war against poverty."

His own organization, DATA, is dedicated to canceling the debt owed by Africa's poorest nations, providing appropriate resources for AIDS treatment, prevention, and education, and lifting global trade rules and restrictive import policies which currently limit Africa's economic growth.

Finally, Bono placed the crisis in context of the work of Simon Wiesenthal, the celebrated Nazi hunter and namesake of the Center. The singer compared the global neglect of suffering Africans to Nazi victims transported to concentration camps during World War II.

"I recently spoke to Congressman Tom Lantos [who was interred in a Hungarian fascist forced labor camp during World War II]. I said to him, 'Respectfully, sir, are we today watching people being put on the trains?' He said, 'Yes.'

"'Can I quote you?' I asked him. He said, 'Yes, you may. Today we are watching people being put on the trains.'

"I just want to offer my services to lay on the tracks," Bono concluded.

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