

# Former ambassador says U.S. lacks political will to tackle food crisis

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—As world leaders continue wrestling over what to do about the spiraling global food crisis, the former U.S. ambassador for humanitarian issues says he worries that Americans “have not yet developed the political and spiritual will” to tackle the situation.

“I think the ethical issue is, as a country and as an individual, are we our brother’s keeper? And I think the answer is yes,” former Ambassador Tony Hall told the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly.

Tony Hall led a United States delegation in Nazareth, Ethiopia, to visit an 8-year-old orphan with HIV/AIDS in this 2005 file photo. Hall, a Democrat, was appointed by President Bush in 2002 to be the U.S. envoy to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization and other Rome-based U.N. agencies that deal with food and hunger. (RNS File Photo)

From 2002 until 2005, Hall was U.S. ambassador to the United Nations agencies in Rome that deal with food and agriculture. Prior to that, he served nearly 25 years as a Democratic congressman from Ohio. While in Congress, he was a leading advocate on hunger issues.

Hall, an evangelical Presbyteri-an, is frustrated by what he sees as a lack of

moral outrage about the current crisis, particularly within many segments of the religious community.

“There’s over 2,500 verses in the Bible that deal with the issue of helping the poor, the sick, the hungry,” Hall said. “God set it up that we are to address this issue and that he works through us. His Plan B? Well, I don’t know what Plan B is. Plan A is the way he set it up.”

The potential for mass starvation and an upsurge in food-related violence around the world is “immense,” he said.

“I think you are going to start to see in the next four or five months horrendous stories, more riots. It’s a major, major problem,” he said.

According to the United Nations, 850 million people around the world already are near starvation. Rising costs of oil, seeds, fertilizer and transportation, combined with extreme weather and poor harvests, have sent food prices soaring.

“We think this is going to add another hundred million to this 850 million people,” Hall said. “What we’re talking about right now is ... staggering.”

Increasing food prices in the United States also have triggered new concerns about domestic hunger. Hall acknowledged the problem but said that should not override American responsibilities abroad. Right now, he said, only about 5 percent of the U.S. humanitarian budget goes overseas.

“We can do much better,” he asserted.

Hall admitted that for the first time since his retirement from public office, he regrets not having an official platform from which to work on this issue. “I’m frustrated,” he said. “I feel inadequate.”

At such times, he said he tries to remind himself of something Mother Teresa once told him when they were together in the streets of Calcutta

surrounded by poverty and desperation.

Rather than getting overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem, “She said, ‘You do the things in front of you,’” he recalled. “So, I keep hanging on to that.”