

Talk

WITH ROSS BUCKLEY



Miners survive while 420,000 children die

FOR a fortnight, Australia was transfixed by the struggle 1km underground to free Todd Russell and Brant Webb. Why were we so enthralled?

Did we feel it could have been us instead? Have we identified with them because they look and sound so comfortingly Australian? Was it because they are innocent victims; because the rock fall that trapped them was not their fault?

Whatever it was, most Australians cared about Todd Russell and Brant Webb. And they have deserved our care.

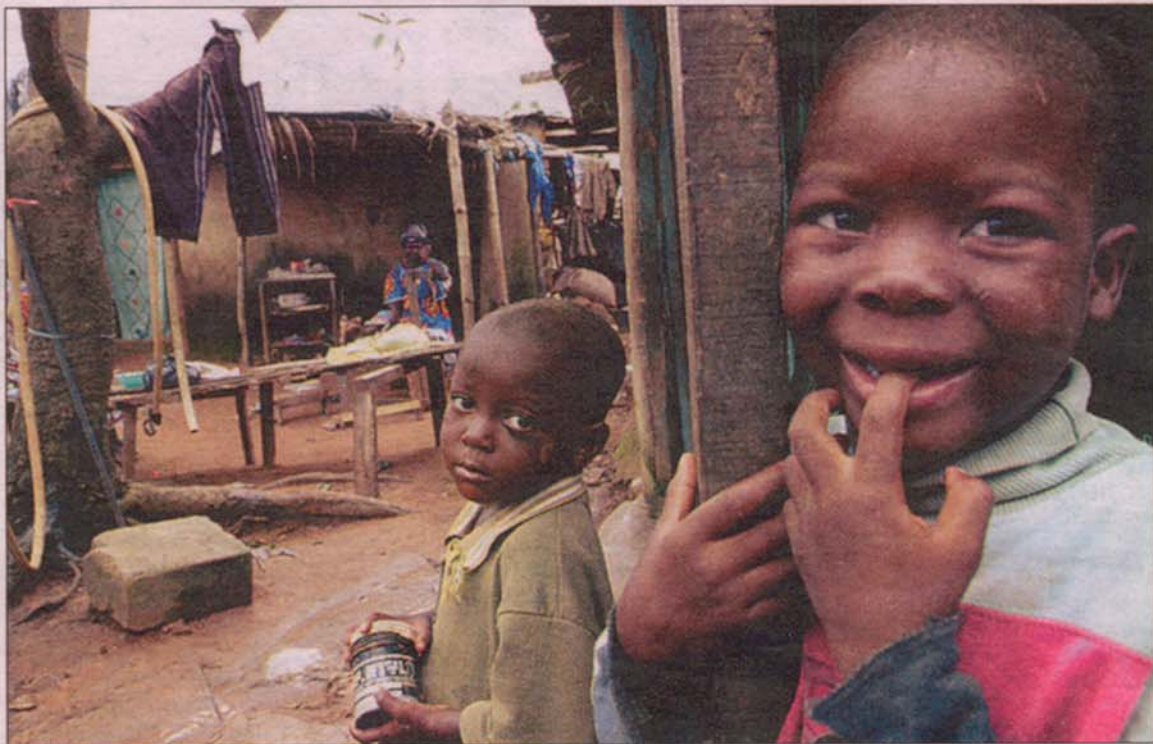
But why do we care so much about them and not about the 420,000 children who died from poverty-related causes around the world in the same 14 days?

If 100 jumbo jets were flown into the ground on one day, it would be the biggest news story of the year - and even bigger if all the passengers were kids. Yet 30,000 children die every day from the effects of poverty: from hunger, bad water and diseases that can be cheaply cured, and the media largely ignore them. Yet these kids can be saved more cheaply and easily than terrorist attacks can be thwarted.

These children are innocent victims - they can no more save themselves than Todd or Brant could. They don't speak with Australian accents, crack Australian jokes or have faces that look like most of us.

But they are innocent, and they are kids, and thousands of them could be saved every day if rich countries would simply increase their aid budgets and forgive more of the debt owed to them by poor countries.

The proportion of Australia's gross national income that we give as overseas aid has decreased from 0.32 per cent to 0.28 per cent in the 10 years of the present Federal Government. We are far short of the promise we made, along with all rich countries, in 2002, to give 0.7 per cent of national income - a figure which five European countries are already exceeding today and another five are on track to reach.



CANCEL DEBT TO BRING RELIEF

■ Poor nations pay rich nations and international institutions \$100 million a day, every day of the year, in debt repayments.

■ This is three times as much as they receive in aid payments.

■ Last year, the G-8 group of rich

nations agreed to cancel the debt of 18 of the poorest countries. Wonderful, but 48 countries still need this relief.

■ Australia could provide leadership on debt relief internationally. We are owed little so it would cost us little.

There have been 47 studies into the effectiveness of overseas aid in the past decade. Two concluded that aid may be ineffective when governance in the recipient country is bad; 45 concluded that aid still works with poor local governance. Aid works better when the recipient country is well governed, but either way it works. Today is World Debt Day.

Every day, poor countries repay three times as much to rich countries in debt service as they receive in aid. The message from

the research into debt relief's effectiveness is the same as for aid. Debt relief works. In many ways, it is preferable to aid as it comes without strings. The world's poor need more aid and more debt relief.

For the first time in human history, poverty is optional. As a planet, we could readily care for every human being.

What is missing is the political will, the caring. We cared so much about Todd and Brant, and they deserved our care. Last year, we

agreed along with other rich countries to extend extraordinary debt relief to Iraq, for geopolitical reasons. If one backs that relief out of last week's Federal Budget, it included no significant real increase in our foreign aid and no extra debt relief beyond international measures.

This is because we Australians put so little pressure on our Government to increase aid and to forgive more of the loans of poor countries to us. European nations give more aid because the voters in those countries care more, and agitate more, about the world's poor.

Two men survive and we celebrate. But 420,000 children die, unnecessarily, and life goes on in Australia, as normal.

The question is: for how long?

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