

AMY GOODMAN: In his first speech before the United Nations General Assembly this September, President Obama optimistically pledged that the United States would not only support the Millennium Development Goals but would, quote, “set our sights on the eradication of extreme poverty in our time.”

Earlier this year, the IMF and the World Bank warned the financial crisis posed a serious challenge to reducing poverty. The World Bank predicted the economic crisis could push another 53 million people in the global South into poverty. Well, according to the latest numbers from the UN, we’re now up to 2.7 billion people around the world who survive on less than two dollars a day, one billion of whom live on less than a dollar a day.

Given the dire statistics and the widening gap between rich and poor, how can we see the eradication of poverty? That’s the central question of a new documentary, *The End of Poverty*? It’s narrated by actor and activist Martin Sheen. The film has been described as *An Inconvenient Truth* for global economics. It premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, opens in New York this Friday.

This is an excerpt that features political scientist Susan George discussing how debt repayment fuels poverty in the global South.

SUSAN GEORGE: Let me give you just one statistic, which I worked out in minutes, because otherwise it’s incomprehensible. Sub-Saharan Africa, which is the poorest part of the world, is paying \$25,000 every minute to Northern creditors. Well, you could build a lot of schools, a lot of hospitals, a lot of job—you could make a lot of job creation, if you were using \$25,000 a minute differently from debt repayment. So there’s this drain.

And I think people don’t understand that it is actually the South that is financing the North. If you look at the flows of money from North to South and then from South to North, what you find is that the South is financing the North to the tune of about \$200 billion every year.

AMY GOODMAN: An excerpt from *The End of Poverty*? Philippe Diaz is the award-winning director of the film, joining us here in our firehouse studio.

Welcome to Democracy Now!

PHILIPPE DIAZ: Thank you for having me.

AMY GOODMAN: Is the end of poverty possible? Why did you do this film?

PHILIPPE DIAZ: Well, you know, I think it was for two reasons. The first one was to explain that we are in a very dramatic situation today, I think much more dramatic even than global warming, because, you know, if, as an expert says in the film, we are consuming today 30 percent more than what the planet can regenerate, we are in a very dramatic situation, because world population increases every year. And it simply means that we will have—for us, in the countries of the North, to be able to maintain these great lifestyles we have, we will have to plunge more and more people below the poverty line in the countries of the South, unless, as the same expert says, we can find six more planets with the same resources, you know, because if everybody in the world was living like we live in America, we would need six planets to have everybody, you know, happy and have the same lifestyle.

AMY GOODMAN: I mean, to give a sense of the severity of the situation, every 3.6 seconds, another person dies of starvation in the world?

PHILIPPE DIAZ: That's correct.

AMY GOODMAN: Every 3.6 seconds.

PHILIPPE DIAZ: Yes, absolutely. And that's what we want to show, is that, you know, I think that—you know, as Miloon Kothari, also another expert, says in the film, you know, the economic system that we chose leads to the sacrifice of some people. So, how many people will we accept to let die or to—you know, to annihilate, until we wake up and want to change the situation, because it's where we are?

You know, until we thought that the resources of the planet were unlimited, you know, we could understand, you know, the other theories about global economics. But today we know they are limited, and we know that we are consuming more than we can regenerate. So what do we do?

AMY GOODMAN: Philippe Diaz, give us a brief history lesson. Go back centuries to 1492.

PHILIPPE DIAZ: Well, yeah. We decided, you know, after doing a lot, a lot of research, I thought that we cannot—you know, the most important for me was the actual time, meaning the present, and someone like John Perkins that you will see later explain clearly, you know, in the film—and he is, for me, the keynote speaker of the film—you know, how we do that actually, meaning how we create this fake debt for third world countries or we force countries to privatize, etc., etc.

But I think if we don't—I thought that if we don't go back in the past, we don't understand, you know, how this thing happened. It's not that one day we woke up and said, "Oh, we'll go take the resource of the South and to create a great lifestyle." You know? It started a long time ago, when, you know, Europe decided brutally to expand. And, you know, it was the Conquistador time in South America; after, it was the French and the British and the Dutch, of course, who went to Indonesia and to Africa. And we took all the resources from these countries.

The first resource that we took was the land. And you take land away from people, it clears that you create a slave, because if the person can't, you know, grow his own food, it means that he has to sell his workforce to survive. And that's the number one resource we take. After, we take all the other resources—water, timber, mineral, everything.

And clearly, we built a system—you know, it's very funny, like if you think about it, how do these small countries, like Great Britain or France or, even worse, Holland and Belgium, become these huge empires? They were very small countries with almost no resources whatsoever, and they became the greatest empires. How? Well, by taking by force, of course, all the resources from the South, creating therefore a huge workforce, you know, that—of course, the slaves that we use with—you know, more and more, bringing even slaves from Africa.

And after, of course, we created this system where—you know, today if the countries of the South say, "OK, we will stop to give you our resources and our workforce," the economies of

the North collapse immediately—the US, Europe, Japan, Korea, etc. We cannot function without the resources of the South, and unpaid almost. We pay maybe, whatever, ten percent of the value of these resources. And it's why, if you want, because we are consuming more than what the planet can regenerate, it means that to maintain our lifestyle in the North, we will have to create more poverty in the South. And that's what we do every single year. There's no other way.

AMY GOODMAN: Let's go to an excerpt of your film that deals with sugarcane workers in Brazil. It features Jaime de Amorim of the Coordinating Landless People Movement and begins with Maria Luisa Mendonça, president of the human rights group Rede Social.

MARIA LUISA MENDONÇA: São Paulo is the largest state that produces ethanol in Brazil and, at the same time, is the richest state. And just to give you an example, last year seventeen workers died in the space where they work. They died of exhaustion. Another 419 workers have died in consequence of their work, in addition to several cases of slave labor in the sugarcane workers that the Ministry of Labor has been registered.

JAIME DE AMORIM: [translated] The grower sees the worker as a slave. They haven't rebelled, so today growers have a much easier way to accumulate wealth than during slavery. Back then, the boss was the slave's owner. He had to take care of the slave's health and food. He had to take care of shelter, even if it was the slave's quarters. Today the boss has no such concerns. He just has to drive the truck to the outskirts of the city. The truck loads up. He takes them back. No more worries.

AMY GOODMAN: How does that concept fit into your film, Philippe Diaz?

PHILIPPE DIAZ: Well, it's the same if you want—what I try to show is that from the beginning, we continue the same system up to today. Just the tools change. You know, like slavery never stopped, and the pressure put on Southern country never stopped. Now we use other kind of tools, like John Perkins explained very well in the film, the tool of the economic hit men. We create fake debt. You know, we force people to privatize.

And, by the way, just as a little example, you know, if I gave—you know, if I chose the title, The End of Poverty? with a question mark, it's to answer one of the eminent experts, you know, in America, which is Mr. Poverty in America, Jeffrey Sachs, you know, run around the world, [inaudible] the ministers and this and that, to explain that the way to end poverty is by giving mosquito nets and fertilizers. You know, in his book—you know, and he's credited, for example, in Bolivia for having ruined the economy of Bolivia by forcing massive privatization when he was an adviser to the then government.

You know, and if you look at—if you look at what's going on, in his—the most important part is that in his book called The End of Poverty, he goes back to the Bolivian experience and says, “Well, after all this time, you know, I can go back to the Bolivian experience and see what was really wrong.” And I thought, “Oh, maybe he'll acknowledge that was a mistake. They should never have privatized, etc.” He said, “No, no. The real problem with Bolivia is altitude. The country is too high in altitude, is why they are in poverty.” So, you can imagine that if you have these kind of experts who are ready to say these kind of things, you know, we are in very serious trouble, because not only we have created this system, you know, for 500 years, where we have been taking all the resources from countries and transforming their people in slave, but on top of that we are continuing to broadcast these kind

of absolutely absurd ideas that by, you know, bringing mosquito net and fertilizer we'll end poverty.

And, of course, as we know, this system has been built forever, and just the tool change. Now we are not taking the land and the resources by way of the gun; we are taking the resources by way of debt, privatization and other economic hit men who go there, you know, and buy, bribe or have the president killed, as John explained very clearly, you know, in order to continue the same policy.

AMY GOODMAN: What do you hope to accomplish with this film?

PHILIPPE DIAZ: I think to show people that we are in a situation more dramatic than global warming today, because, of course, global warming, as we all know, is extremely dramatic, and in the next ten years or twenty years people will start to die massively because of global warming, but today people are dying every day. You know the movie should be almost dedicated to the children of the world. It's why I put children all over the place, because they are the innocent victim of that in the movie and with this little child begging in the street. You know, today you have 20,000 children who die every day, you know, because of the poverty issue. And they only die—they only die because they are poor, and they are poor only because we are rich. You know, and unless we understand that and we take matter in our own hands—

AMY GOODMAN: And do what?

PHILIPPE DIAZ: And, well, the movie brings a lot of solutions, you know, from political solution, like agrarian reform, ending the monopoly over natural resources, changing the tax system. There should never be tax on consumption or labor. You know, there should be tax on property ownership. You know, and to the major—one of the major—one of the key experts at the end of the film said the solution is called “de-growth.” And—

AMY GOODMAN: De-growth?

PHILIPPE DIAZ: De-growth, from the North, of course, because there is no other way. Either we accept that millions of people will die so we can continue to grow or even stay stable, or we will have to de-grow. De-grow doesn't mean necessarily drive more, eat less or etc. It means like—as he says, it means work less. What about if we work five hours a day and consume less, but consume better? You know, that's all the movement which is starting in the world. And there is no other way.

Again, it's a mathematical problem; it's not even a political problem. It's a mathematical problem. We have—today, because of the system we created, we cannot feed billions of people, clearly, when the resources of the planet are well sufficient to feed all these people. But because of our system, this inequality we created by way of the gun, you know, these people will die, you know, million by million.

AMY GOODMAN: Well, Philippe Diaz, I want to thank you for joining us. The film is *The End of Poverty*?