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Minister defends cut in overseas aid budget

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Government borrowing to run the country for 10 days matches the entire overseas aid budget for one year, an under-fire junior minister revealed today.

Peter Power said despite massive cuts in expenditure, Irish taxpayers were still making a real impact on the lives of millions of people all over the world.

A record €920m was donated through Irish Aid, the Government's overseas aid programme, last year.

Mr Power said the decision to cut it by some €222m was difficult and painful but he stressed it had to be done to restore the country's public finances.

"This week alone we will borrow €480m to pay for doctors, nurses and gardaí on the streets," said Mr Power, minister of state for overseas development.

"In 10 days time we will have borrowed the equivalent of the entire amount we spend on overseas aid development.

"We have a responsibility as Government to make sure our finances are sustainable, without which we couldn't continue with overseas aid in the future."

In its annual report for 2008 Irish Aid:

- * Supported 13 million Ethiopians at risk of hunger
- * Cut the number of Zambian families surviving on one meal a day by almost a third
- * Supported the treatment of almost 150,000 people affected by AIDS
- * Supplied fertiliser and seeds for some 1.5 million Malawian families
- * Supported 4.6 million Palestinian refugees through funding to the UN

Meanwhile 222 people – one for every million euro cut from the aid budget - protested outside the Department of Finance to call on Government to show that Ireland does care.

Ireland's NGOs maintain that the reductions are already having a devastating impact on the lives of people living in absolute poverty.

Hans Zomer of Dochas, the network of Ireland's aid agencies, said the world's most vulnerable people are already feeling the impact of the financial crisis and the effects of climate change, caused by rich nations.

"We want to remind the government that Irish people want our long-standing solidarity with the poorest people of our world to continue," said Mr Zomer.

"As a nation, we do not want to see the weakest and most vulnerable suffer disproportionately. To target the poorest and most vulnerable who have done least to cause this crisis is a terrible injustice. The government needs to get back on track and keep its promise to the world's poor."

But Mr Power said while cuts are unfortunate, the comment did not serve the Irish Aid programme well or the Irish public.

"Even after the reductions this year, we are still the sixth largest donor in the world in per capita terms," continued Mr Power.

"We have refocused our programme on eradicating hunger and poverty and are committed to making our aid even more effective. Ireland's engagement in overseas development is as strong as ever."