

‘India has not made enough progress in health’

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UN pities Centre’s low health budget

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Special adviser to UN secretary-general on millennium development goals (MDGs) Jeffrey Sachs has said that India’s National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) is the world’s largest effort to meet the goal related to maternal and child health.

He, however, feels that the country has not done well enough on public health front and better progress on malaria control could have been achieved.

In the capital to assess the progress of the NRHM as head of the international advisory panel for the same, Sachs underlined the urgency of the raising government investment in public health, and said private spending was no answer to India’s public health challenge.

“India’s spending on public health should go up to at least 4 to 5 per cent of the GDP as against the current 1 per cent. About 75

per cent of the health spending should come from the government sector. That must happen now,” Sachs told The Tribune, repeatedly stressing the need of scaling up expenditure in the health sector.

The expert, who earlier met health minister Anbumani Ramadoss to understand the challenges facing the NRHM, said the single-largest challenge to India’s health problems was lack of public spending and political will for the purpose.

“We hope this issue is seen as national and is not subjected to whims of politicians,” said Sachs, who advised India to take heart from the rapid progress being made under the NRHM, which he described as “a highly-dynamic public health initiative that has done well to bring health to the poorest of the poor.” He added the programme could well be an example for similarly situated nations.

Sachs said India had not done enough on health front, and also

voiced his concerns about the strange paradox of over nutrition and under nutrition existing simultaneously in the country. “We have discussed this issue with the health minister and also the other challenges of high infant and maternal mortality rate. By the time we meet again, which would be six months later, we would have reached further from here,” Sachs said on the NRHM.

Again blaming the government for not spending enough on health for decades, Sachs said the neglect had left India’s health sector severely deficient. “The deficit will take time to go,” he said, sounding highly-satisfied with the NRHM.

So much so that Sachs has decided to invite health ministers from other nations to the next meeting of the international advisory panel for the NRHM and the health ministry. He also plans to bring the NRHM into international focus when the world meets on September 25 to discuss the mid-way progress on MDGs.