

Press release

UNAIDS calls for renewed leadership as UN General Assembly reviews progress made toward universal access

New York, 21 May 2007 – Welcoming the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s commitment and personal pledge that the United Nations will continue to prioritize the response to AIDS, the Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) emphasized the critical need to build leadership in all sectors to sustain the global AIDS response.

The UN Secretary-General addressed the General Assembly promising that the UN would deliver as one on AIDS and to make every effort to mobilize funding for the response to the epidemic, now and in the longer term.

General Assembly President Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa called it a race against time and added that world leaders need to honor their commitments and live up to their promises.

The comments come as the UN General Assembly meets to focus on progress made on increasing access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support—one year after Member States reinforced their commitment to strengthen their response to the epidemic in a new Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS.

“AIDS is one of the make-or-break issues of our time,” said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS. “We have made tremendous progress in recent years, but it is vital that leaders continue to prioritize AIDS—not just now but over the longer term. With nearly 40 million people living with HIV—8,000 deaths and 11,000 new infections every day, AIDS is going to be with us for decades to come,” he added.

Since June 2006, 90 low- and middle-income countries have set national targets for universal access. Twenty-five countries have incorporated these targets into updated, costed and prioritized national plans.

Two million people now have access to treatment – 28% of those in need globally. The highest coverage is in Latin America and the Caribbean and the lowest coverage in the Middle East and North Africa. There has also been increased availability of treatment drugs through creative use of global trade agreements: in 2005, Cameroon, Eritrea and Ghana issued compulsory licenses for importation of generic AIDS medicines.

“However for every one person who starts AIDS treatment—six more will become infected with HIV,” said Dr. Piot. “HIV infection levels are falling in some parts of Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda but by-and-large, prevention efforts lag way behind. Which brings me back to the leadership question—without it, we can not reach these ambitious universal access targets,” he said.

UNAIDS continues to stress the need to accelerate funding to the \$18 billion needed to tackle AIDS in 2007. Also to “make the money work” for people who need it the most today with plans in place for tomorrow. And to galvanize support to overcome the injustices and inequalities that drive the AIDS epidemic—such as the low status of women and girls.

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UNAIDS is an innovative joint venture of the United Nations, bringing together the efforts and resources of the UNAIDS Secretariat and ten UN system organizations in the AIDS response. The Secretariat headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland—with staff on the ground in more than 80 countries. Coherent action on AIDS by the UN system is coordinated in countries through UN theme groups, and joint programmes on AIDS. UNAIDS' Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Visit the UNAIDS Web site at www.unaids.org