

Speech

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7th Annual US Chiefs of Mission Conference on HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean

Port of Spain, Trinidad, 22 October 2008

***“Maintaining Momentum in HIV/AIDS Prevention,
Care and Treatment in the Caribbean”***

**Remarks by Dr. Karen Sealey Director, Caribbean Regional
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Greetings to the dignitaries, PANCAP colleagues and media.

I am pleased to be participating in this very important meeting and to be able to address you on behalf of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). This annual Conference of Chiefs of the US Missions in the Caribbean has become a very unique and important gathering within the spectrum of opportunities to discuss this issue that is so critical for the development of the Caribbean.

During the last 27 years, the response to HIV in the Caribbean, at the individual and community levels, has been characterized by the progression from fear, blame, desperation and denial, through the development of a collective will of Caribbean countries to face the reality of HIV, and now a high degree of optimism and hope that the epidemic will be brought under control in this region.

At every step, UNAIDS and the UN cosponsoring agencies and the international community have been privileged to partner with the countries at the national and regional levels. This meeting is yet another example of the exceptionality of the response to HIV/AIDS – a sustained collaboration between the Caribbean, the United States of America and the international community to further address this epidemic.

Hon. Prime Minister, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen ...What challenges are we facing today in the Caribbean?

In 2007, 230,000 people were living with HIV in the Caribbean, making it the most HIV-affected region in the Americas: its adult prevalence rate is double that of North America and Latin America. The epidemic is increasingly affecting women and in particular, young women; almost as many women as men are now living with the virus. This is a recipe for destabilizing the very social fabric of Caribbean nations - its families.

In 2007 alone, the Caribbean lost 38 of its citizens to AIDS every single day: it is the leading cause of death among 25-44 year-olds, the most productive age group in any nation. During that same year, on a daily basis, 55 Caribbean citizens were newly infected with HIV.

In the Caribbean epidemic the vulnerable groups that are affected disproportionately include young women, men who have sex with men, sex workers – both male and female, crack-cocaine users, and prisoners. The epidemic feeds off of the discrimination and stigmatization which have existed since the beginning and remains to varying degrees throughout Caribbean communities and at workplaces. The spread of HIV is also being fuelled by serious gaps in gender equality, and the fact that differences in sexual orientation are the cause of discrimination. With the removal of homosexuality as a crime in Panama recently, all the countries of the Americas which have homosexuality as a crime are now located in this region.

Despite this challenging situation, significant progress has been accomplished and a momentum created in HIV prevention, care, and treatment. However, this momentum should not be taken for granted. It needs to be not just maintained but in some areas urgently intensified.

First, it has been well established that leadership is fundamental to the campaign against HIV. In the Caribbean this issue engages the collective attention of the Heads of Governments on a regular basis, led by the Honourable Denzil Douglas, Prime Minister of St

Kitts and Nevis. Leadership at the national level varies and I take the opportunity to congratulate Honorable Prime Minister Patrick Manning on his leadership which ensures that the response in Trinidad and Tobago is truly multi-sectoral and that considerable funding is provided for prevention and treatment. (Of course, there is always a need for more.)

The Caribbean stands out as the only region in the world which has established and sustained an inclusive regional partnership to respond to HIV. The PAN CARIBBEAN PARTNERSHIP AGAINST HIV/AIDS, (PANCAP) is one of the UNAIDS Best Practices which we proudly promote in other regions. Special mention must be given to the strong advocacy of CRN+ which makes sure members remain true to the principle of greater involvement of persons living with HIV and AIDS. The approval of the 2nd Caribbean Regional Strategic Framework on HIV earlier this year, demonstrates that this unique partnership has taken root. This momentum needs to be put on a sustainable footing through core funding and development of the PANCAP Coordinating Unit and of the National AIDS Coordinating Mechanisms, which are the central organs of the national response and the backbone of planning and monitoring at the regional level.

Within the international community, key players including UNAIDS and its cosponsors (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank), the US Government through PEPFAR-USAID-CDC/GAP and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria have joined forces to coordinate their activities at global, regional and country level. Harmonized and standardized measurement tools and shared data are being used to assess progress achieved in responding to HIV. At the country level, UNAIDS, World Bank and Clinton Foundation are among the organizations that have collaborated with CHRC in the establishment of national monitoring and evaluation programmes. For the first time, 100% of Caribbean countries reported to the biennial United Nations High-Level Meeting on AIDS held in June 2008. This is momentum in coordination, harmonization and information sharing which has to be maintained. But in addition, support is needed to ensure that countries provide regular, client-oriented feedback to their communities on the status of the epidemic and response.

In the Caribbean, the provision of antiretroviral treatment to people living with HIV is a success story resulting from joint national, regional and international efforts. One of the contributing factors has been the reduction in ARV prices achieved through negotiations with the pharmaceutical companies, coordinated by CARICOM in collaboration with UNAIDS, PAHO and other partners. In addition, key actors including PAHO, UNICEF; UNAIDS, PEPFAR, the Global Fund and the Clinton Foundation have coordinated efforts to ensure that knowledge and resources are made available at regional, country and district levels, for scaling up access to treatment.

The result is very impressive. In 2003, only 4 000 people were on treatment: by the end of 2007 that figure had increased to 30 000. Trinidad and Tobago is among three countries to achieve high coverage of antiretroviral treatment. However, still too many people are dying of AIDS in the region. The momentum in treatment needs to be intensified through further scaling up and decentralization of programmes so that all Caribbean countries achieve universal access by the end of 2010.

In the area of prevention, the Caribbean has secured safe national blood supplies to prevent HIV transmission through transfusion of blood and blood products; put in place universal precautionary measures to reduce transmission in health care settings and reduced mother-to-child transmission of HIV considerably. Now fewer Caribbean children are born with the virus.

Unfortunately, that same level of success has not been observed in the area of behaviour modification programmes. In 2007 alone, 20,000 new HIV infections occurred in the Caribbean. UNAIDS estimates that globally, in 2007, for every 50 persons living with HIV put on antiretroviral treatment there were 100 new HIV infections. The cost of sustained treatment over the life of an increasing number of patients is prohibitive - no country can afford to treat itself out of this epidemic. Here is an area in which the momentum is weak and needs a concerted thrust on all fronts. As Michel Sidibe, UNAIDS Deputy Executive Director, urged at the last PANCAP AGM, we have to turn off the tap of infections. Countries need to increase their capacity to know their epidemics through comprehensive surveillance and relevant and timely operational research and to undertake scale-up of evidence-based, behaviour modification programmes if the annual number of new infections is to be reduced significantly.

Regarding legislative reform to protect against HIV-related stigma and discrimination, the momentum has been almost imperceptible. People are still afraid to take an HIV test because they may face ostracism or the prospect of losing their jobs if they are found to be positive. Honourable Prime Minister, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, as long as discrimination is supported by national laws and people living with HIV and their families are afraid to seek the protection of the law, then national responses to the epidemic will continue to be hampered in their effectiveness and limited in their scope and success. Increasing the momentum in this area requires the engagement of Attorneys-General and Parliaments and sensitization of the population on issues related to sexuality and its differences.

Hon. Prime Minister, Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, the Caribbean is fortunate in that over the next 12 months, the region will be presented with four opportunities to create new impetus in the response to HIV:

- The Ministers of Education and Health from Latin America and the Caribbean met in Mexico City in August and committed to improving the effectiveness of HIV education, including comprehensive sexuality education. I am sure that the Caribbean will move quickly to implement the joint ministerial recommendations as it has a long history of developing HFLE programmes. UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNICEF, UNIFEM and UNDP, as well as PEPFAR and other key international players are keen to offer support.
- The SUMMIT OF THE AMERICAS in Port-of-Spain next year has the theme - Securing our citizens' future by promoting Human Prosperity, Energy Security and Environmental Sustainability. This is a key opportunity to create more momentum at the highest level, understanding as we do, that human prosperity cannot be achieved if HIV remains a serious challenge to public health in the Americas. It would be crucial for this important gathering to at least note the status of the epidemic, its magnitude, successes achieved through national efforts in collaboration with PEPFAR and other grants and reaffirm their commitment to the Millennium Development Goal 6.
- Honourable Prime Minister, the FIRST CARIBBEAN GAMES next year in Port-of-Spain will bring together the talented athletes of the region. It is an occasion to demonstrate that not only do governments, and the regional and international community care about their excellence in sport, but also about their knowledge and ability to protect themselves against HIV. Further, armed with evidence-based information, these sports men and women, on their return to their countries, can be effective role models to convey behaviour modification messages.

- Finally, the next COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING (CHOGM) is to be held in Port-of-Spain, bringing together leaders from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia who are facing the same serious challenges that HIV poses to their public health and socio-economic development. There will be discussions around progress accomplished on CHOGM initiatives on “Respect and Understanding”, two of the fundamental concepts underpinning the promoting of diversity and caring within HIV programming and support to people living with HIV. The UN system and the international community as a whole should be mobilized especially to support the business, youth and people fora to integrate the issues of HIV and development.

Honourable Prime Minister, I feel confident that once again you will be one of the major advocates for the insertion of HIV and the Caribbean’s special needs in the above events. I wish to take this opportunity to thank you in advance.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would also like, through the good offices of the Chiefs of Mission, to thank the President and the people of the United States of America for their support to the Caribbean and for the increasing collaboration between PEPFAR and UNAIDS and its co-sponsors at global, regional and country levels.

Finally, Your Excellencies, I wish you a successful conference and remind you that the UN system stands ready to collaborate as you seek to assist the countries and the regional entities to ...”Maintain the momentum in the prevention, treatment and care of HIV”.

I thank you.