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South Africa's Reinvigorated AIDS Response

Mr. President, please allow me to pay my tributes to President Nelson Mandela on this special day—without his courage and vision, we would not be celebrating World AIDS Day together. I remember here in Pretoria President Mandela warning us that “time wasted in unnecessary deliberation is time lost for action.” We cannot afford to waste another moment, not when our idleness is measured by the deaths of our most precious resource, our children. But today we move forward. We are living Mandela’s historic legacy.

This special day is about paying respect. Respect to countless human beings—to the two million of our fellow brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers and children who died of AIDS last year. Respect to the more than 5 million who lack access to lifesaving treatment. Respect to those who are criminalized—because they are men who have sex with men, because they sell sex, because they inject drugs. Respect for those who suffer stigma and discrimination because they live with HIV. Respect to the women victims of mass rape.

But it is also a day to celebrate. In 2008, the estimated number of new HIV infections was 30% lower than at the epidemic’s peak 12 years earlier.¹ We also see evidence that people are living positively with HIV. As treatment improves and extends lives and battles against stigma and discrimination are won, people living with HIV are able to regain their roles as active, productive members of their community, as healthy parents and children, and as champions for the AIDS movement.

As an African, I am so happy to be here in Pretoria. President Zuma, I am here today to stand in solidarity with your commitment and vision—you are giving hope to so many millions who have been waiting for South Africa to join the front line in the global response.

I refer to the bold and ambitious goals you set in your milestone speech in October, to accelerate the AIDS response and cut new infections in half, and scale up treatment to 80% of those who need it by 2011.²

¹ UNAIDS, 2009 AIDS Epidemic Update.

² Speech delivered by President Jacob Zuma, Johannesburg, October 29, 2009.

The AIDS goals mark a fundamental break from the past. You have shattered years of official ambivalence, rallying citizens to take responsibility for learning their status, reducing their risk and seeking treatment.

You are the architect of ending this epidemic. Your pledge has been received with a sense of euphoria by the community as it sets a bold challenge to all of us. A challenge that has galvanized the interest of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

You have lit a fuse for a movement demanding social justice, equality and development.

We just released the annual UNAIDS Outlook report which reveals two things about the epidemic. First, that it is quickly transitioning and we need to be smart and strategic in adjusting our response accordingly. Second, the report reveals how, in an ugly and tragic way, AIDS reflects global inequity and injustice—robbing babies, youth and people in their prime of life of dignity and security.

AIDS is a bright marker of the inequality in our world—separating the haves from the have-nots.

Let me remind you who is dying of AIDS—they are mainly Africans—1.4 million last year.³

AIDS reveals many fundamental injustices. While mother-to-child transmission is now part of the history books in the North, 390,000 African babies were born infected in 2008. Only half of pregnant women living with HIV in South Africa received treatment to prevent transmission of the virus to their child, even though evidence shows that with full access, we can virtually eliminate HIV infection in newborn babies.⁴

We must put an end to this injustice. I see a new movement responding to my call for the virtual elimination of vertical transmission—saving mothers and saving babies. Together, we will bring an end to this epidemic.

And while we work to end this epidemic, we will demand human rights and justice.

In South Africa, teenage girls are two-and-a half times more likely to be infected than their male counterparts. This rises to *4 times more* as they grow into women, wives and mothers. Lurking behind these statistics is pervasive gender discrimination and unchecked violence against women.⁵

³ UNAIDS, 2009 AIDS Epidemic Update.

⁴ UNAIDS, 2009 AIDS Epidemic Update.

⁵ UNAIDS, 2009 AIDS Epidemic Update.

In parts of Africa, new and existing laws punish those most at risk, sending the marginalized further into hiding and out of reach of prevention, treatment and care.

We will not stop fighting for human rights and justice as long as the lion's share of the drugs we need to treat people living with HIV are produced outside this Continent.

We will not stop while our friends living with HIV and those most at risk of HIV suffer stigma and discrimination daily from health workers, employers, and others.

We will not stop while people living with HIV are dying of TB. We will not stop until we have universal access.

Universal access delivers results. Our newest data show that more than 4 million people in low- and middle-income countries were receiving antiretroviral therapy by the end of last year. That is a 36% increase in just one year.⁶ And that is 4 million people with HIV who are working, raising families, and keeping the engine of the economy running, even amid the global financial crisis. We can't afford to sideline a single one of them. Reaching universal access, especially amidst changing treatment guidelines and the growing need for second line drugs, requires a redoubling of efforts. We are in urgent need of global consensus on how to ensure sustainable financing of the response.

I look to this great nation—a nation familiar with the power of movements against injustice—to forge a mass prevention revolution movement. We will never end this pandemic with 7400 new infections across the world every day.

Prevention saves lives, it saves families, and it saves money. By cutting the number of new infections in Africa in half by 2015 we can prevent an estimated 2.25 million new infections and avert lifetime treatment costs of some \$12.5 billion. That is a huge gain, financially and in human lives.

We need radical social change for prevention. I look to you to unite the power of the AIDS movement, the women's movement, the trade unions and the faith-based organizations to mobilize a permanent campaign till we halve the rate of new infections, and halve that again, and again.

I see a special place for young people in this revolution. In them, I see a different future—governed by the principles of equality and dignity for all. These are the people who deserve special consideration for UNDP's Red Ribbon Award, which recognizes community groups for their work to support those infected and affected by the disease, and their commitment to ending the epidemic.

⁶ UNAIDS, 2009 AIDS Epidemic Update.

Mr. President, I salute you for taking up the voice of the voiceless. In taking on this cause, your stature as a truly Continental leader is emerging—creating a legacy that will live far beyond us here in Pretoria.

What you do from this day forward will write the history of AIDS across Africa and the World.

From today, we reject all excuses for failure, we tolerate no more injustice, and we bond together in a wedge of activism, slicing through complacency to achieve our goal of universal access.

Let us unite today in the conviction that we will achieve universal access for all.