

BY: Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

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PLACE: Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea

OCCASION: Launch of the Report of the Commission on AIDS in the Pacific

*As Delivered by J.V.R.Prasada Rao,
Special Advisor to the Executive Director*

Please check against delivery

His Excellency Sir Paulias Matanaem, Governor General of Papua New Guinea, Honourable Deputy Prime Minister, Samoa and the Chair of the Commission on AIDS in Pacific, Excellencies and distinguished participants.

I am extremely pleased that the path breaking report of the independent Commission on AIDS in the Pacific will be launched today by the Governor General of Papua New Guinea. I convey my warm greetings and best wishes to the His Excellency the Governor General, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Government and the people of PNG on this important occasion.

The Constitution of the Commission on AIDS in the Pacific is a promise that UNAIDS has been proud to redeem. We avoided committing the mistake of including the region with Asia as that would effectively have blocked our efforts in projecting the special problems of a region which is unique in many ways: culturally, geographically and environmentally too. When we planned to develop this report, we chose a group of eminent personalities from the region who are a healthy mixture of people who have excelled both in public health and public life. And they have come out with a product that the Commission can justifiably be proud of. I congratulate the Chair and members of the Commission for bringing out an excellent report.

The region's response to the AIDS epidemic is as uneven as its economic growth and poverty reduction. Limited awareness and understanding of the potential impact of the epidemic, weak health care systems and an unsupportive legal environment have all contributed to varying degrees of response by Governments across the region. The report has clearly highlighted the factors inhibiting a strong and determined response to the epidemic. While some of these are known, it is for the first time that all the issues were addressed so comprehensively by the Commission.

UNAIDS fully supports this report and finds that many of the recommendations in the report align very closely with the priorities identified in the Outcome Framework for Action agreed by all the 10 cosponsors and the secretariat of UNAIDS. I would like to highlight two of them.

First is the immediate need to take proactive steps to reduce the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and the communities who are vulnerable to it. Many of the legislations dealing with communities like sex workers, men who have sex with men are from the colonial past and have lost their relevance in today's society. They present impediments in effective implementation of programmes dealing with these communities. As the Secretary General United Nations Mr Ban Ki-moon has aptly observed during the launch of the Report at UN Headquarters "Successful AIDS responses do not punish people. They protect them." I appeal to all the Governments in Pacific to review their legislative framework and repeal or amend such legislations which enhance AIDS-related stigma and discrimination.

In this connection, I commend the efforts of people living with HIV, men who have sex with men and other vulnerable groups for organizing themselves into effective networks to secure their rights and face AIDS related stigma in the society. These organizations play an important role in projecting the attention of leaders and policy makers to the special problems faced by infected and affected populations. Organizations like IGAT HOPE, which had a humble beginning, have now emerged as strong champions of the people living with HIV in PNG and across the region.

The second issue is the weak health care infrastructure in the region. I appeal to the Pacific leaders to invest in strengthening their health systems which provide sustenance to all health related programmes and not just AIDS. As the Commission rightly pointed out, small countries in the region cannot afford to run vertical programmes exclusively for HIV and AIDS. HIV programmes need to be integrated into the general health systems in areas like treatment, prevention of mother to child transmission and counseling and testing services. Governments should be willing to invest more and more in programmes which are now overly dependent upon external finance. In the present global economic scenario, such funding can't be ensured at the present level for a long time. Increased investment of domestic resources is the long term answer to this challenge of shrinkage of resources to health sector programmes and HIV in particular.

I would like to commend the Governor General, the Prime Minister and the Government of PNG for keeping AIDS as a high priority. It is one of the few countries which have a HIV-related statute. The scale up of treatment programmes in Port Moresby and other towns has also been quite remarkable in recent years. But there are a number of people out there in remote areas of the country who are in immediate need of services, both for treatment and prevention. Commodities like antiretroviral drugs and condoms need to be much more extensively available for the rural populace. As it takes time to strengthen Government health care systems in these remote areas, it is useful to involve informal organizations like the churches in AIDS related programmes and provide them sustained funding. We must keep in mind this country accounts for more than 90% of the infections in the region. Prevention of further spread of HIV in PNG is an important determinant for the AIDS response in the entire region.

The year 2010 is a landmark for the global HIV response. The countries in this region declared in 2006 their commitment to secure universal access to prevention, care and treatment for its people. This year, UNAIDS is encouraging all countries to review their progress and rededicate themselves to halt and reverse the epidemic by 2015 as a Millennium Development Goal.

I see a great opportunity for the Pacific countries to achieve both universal access by 2010 and Millennium Development Goal 6 by 2015 if they adopt the recommendations of the Commission and implement them in a time bound manner. The Pacific region has the potential to achieve both these goals if the necessary political will and determination exists among its leaders. While they must be commended for acting early when HIV started showing its face in the region, this commitment should continue to drive the AIDS programmes on a priority basis to secure universal access to services to its people.

I once again congratulate the Commission for an insightful and actionable report and the Government of PNG for demonstrating their commitment to tackle the problem by launching the report in Port Moresby.

I wish the function all success.

Thank you.

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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. The Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Contributing to achieving global commitments to universal access to comprehensive interventions for HIV prevention, treatment, care and support is the number one priority for UNAIDS. Visit the UNAIDS web site at www.unaids.org