



**Press release**

## **BELGIAN PRINCESS MATHILDE APPOINTED UNICEF AND UNAIDS SPECIAL REPRESENTATIVE FOR CHILDREN AND AIDS**

**Antwerp, 27 May 2005** – Today on the occasion of the granting of an honorary doctorate to UNICEF at the University of Antwerp, HRH Princess Mathilde announced her acceptance to become a UNICEF and UNAIDS Special Representative for children affected by and living with HIV/AIDS.

As Princess Mathilde states: “The HIV/AIDS epidemic also strikes children indiscriminately. Children infected, or otherwise affected, by this terrible disease are very vulnerable. They are often without defences once they become orphans - abandoned and alone with no one taking care of them and, therefore, prone to becoming victims of abuse, violence, trafficking and other types of exploitation. I want to give these vulnerable children a voice. I want to draw more attention to this growing problem.”

As Special Representative, HRH Princess Mathilde is planning to make field trips with UNAIDS and UNICEF to generate more attention and support for children affected by and living with HIV/AIDS.

According to UNICEF and UNAIDS, the global AIDS epidemic is one of the worst crises affecting the world today. It is also the crisis likely to have the most severe impact on children and youngsters. Children are not only affected directly by the disease but also indirectly through the death of their parents or caretakers. This is leaving increasing numbers of children without even the basic protection thus increasing the risks of abuse and mistreatment.

Currently, 15 million children worldwide have lost one or both parents to AIDS. More than 2 million children are HIV positive and more than half a million children died last year of AIDS-related causes. Millions more have been made vulnerable by the disease, as AIDS both thrives on and exacerbates other challenges, including poverty, armed conflict, ignorance and gender discrimination.

The situation is most severe in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where 12 million children have been orphaned by AIDS. By 2010, unless millions more Africans get life-prolonging treatment with antiretroviral drugs, the number of children orphaned by AIDS is likely to exceed 18 million. By that year, every fifth child in the worst affected countries of southern Africa will be an orphan, largely because of AIDS.

AIDS is also rolling back decades of progress made in child survival in several African countries. The impact on children who have been orphaned or living with an ill or dying parent is traumatic and severely undermines their potential for development and that of their countries, according to UNICEF and UNAIDS,

To help address this growing crisis, UNICEF is launching a campaign on children affected by HIV/AIDS to address the needs of the most vulnerable.

Marc Van Boven, Chairman of UNICEF Belgium, stressed in Antwerp the involvement of Princess Mathilde in the campaign for children affected by and living with HIV/AIDS “as an opportunity for UNICEF to put children first on the AIDS agenda. The campaign is, and must be seen as, a unified response and a commitment to do business differently and to assure that children made vulnerable by AIDS have safe, healthy and productive childhoods.” UNICEF Belgium is running a campaign for children affected by and living with HIV/AIDS in Russia and Namibia ([www.unicef.be](http://www.unicef.be)).

UNAIDS Executive Director Dr Peter Piot, who was present at the University of Antwerp ceremony, said: “I am delighted to join UNICEF in appointing HRH Princess Mathilde as Special Representative for Children and AIDS. I am confident that she will be a strong advocate and will make a difference in the fight against AIDS.”

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*For more information, please contact Philippe Henon, UNICEF Belgium, tel. +32 2 230 59 70, mobile. +32 477 555 023, [phenon@unicef.be](mailto:phenon@unicef.be), or Dominique De Santis, UNAIDS, Geneva, tel. +41 22 791 4509, [desantis@unaids.org](mailto:desantis@unaids.org).*