

DESPITE HIGHEST HIV PREVALENCE, BOTSWANA'S AIDS MOVEMENT GROWING, SAYS UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Francistown, Botswana, 1 December 2003 – Despite having the highest adult HIV prevalence worldwide at close to 40%, Botswana has managed to mount an effective response to AIDS over the past few years. “Botswana’s growing AIDS movement is the result of President Mogae’s leadership and openness on AIDS coupled with the active involvement of people living with HIV,” said Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director, who was speaking at a World AIDS Day commemoration today. “By breaking the silence on AIDS, President Mogae has not only galvanized the whole African continent, but become a true leader in the global AIDS fight.”

Botswana is the first African country to embark on a programme of rolling out free antiretrovirals to all its citizens living with HIV who need treatment. The biggest obstacles to accessing the medicines are the lack of trained health workers to effectively deliver ARVs and stigma. The stigma surrounding AIDS not only deters people from getting an HIV test, but turns people away from seeking care and treatment. “AIDS-related stigma must be eliminated if we are going to win the fight against AIDS,” said Dr Piot.

This year’s global movement to ensure greater access to HIV treatment will not only prolong the lives of those living with HIV in some of the worst-affected countries, but prevent thousands of new HIV infections as more people have access to voluntary counselling and testing services. “The global initiative to provide 3 million people with access to HIV treatment by 2005, otherwise known as the 3 by 5 campaign, coupled with President Bush’s Emergency Plan for HIV/AIDS, launched earlier this year, offers renewed hope for HIV-positive people in Botswana,” said Jean Alfazema Kalilani, Chair of the UN Theme Group on HIV/AIDS, and Bjoern Førde, UN Resident Coordinator.

AIDS is a core theme of the development assistance framework under which the UN system seeks support for Botswana’s development. “Although Botswana has one of the strongest economies in Africa, its prosperity could soon be wiped out by AIDS,” said Dr Piot. “We must ensure that funds from development banks are made available as grants to prevent an economic crisis from taking hold in the country.”

Today’s World AIDS Day event was organized by Botswana’s network for people living with HIV/AIDS (BONEPWA+). President Mogae, along with Peter Ngoma, the Mayor of Francistown, Elizabeth Montsheng, Chairperson of BONEPWA+, and Peter Piot, spoke at the event.

The AIDS epidemic in Botswana shows no signs of levelling off. According to UNAIDS, HIV prevalence among young pregnant women aged 15-24 remains at 39%. An estimated 330,000 people are living with HIV in the country. "AIDS prevention programmes, particularly targeting young people, must be scaled up dramatically if we want to keep future generations HIV-free," said Dr Piot.

For more information, please contact: Kwame Ampomah, UNAIDS, Gaborone, mobile (+267) 721 21214, Anne Winter, UNAIDS, Geneva, tel. (+41 22) 791 4577, or Dominique De Santis, UNAIDS, Geneva, tel. (+41 22) 791 4509. For more information about UNAIDS, please visit our website, www.unaids.org.