

HIV/AIDS as a Matter of Global and National Security

Keynote Address by Professor Lars O. Kallings, Special Envoy of the United Nations Secretary-General on HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe
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[Mr Chairman, friends and colleagues]

I am pleased to be able to join you at this important occasion. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, has made the global fight against AIDS his personal priority as HIV/AIDS constitutes a most formidable threat to the future of mankind.

Since the very beginning of the global epidemic, I have been involved with the scientific and practical response, and, increasingly with the political response – and so I was particularly honoured that earlier this year, the Secretary-General asked me to become his special envoy for HIV/ AIDS in Eastern Europe. I was at the same time humbled with respect to the greatness of Russia and the rest of the Region as well as to the enormous scope of the rapidly evolving epidemic. On a personal note I like to add that I was raised on the island of Gotland, right in the middle of the Baltic Sea and have grown up close to Russian history and culture – a history that dates back to the intense trading over the sea and by the big rivers already more than 1200 years ago.

At the outset, let me make clear why I think HIV/AIDS must be in the forefront of concerns of the Russian Federation: because the epidemic is spreading rapidly, because it threatens young people especially, and because there still is an opportunity to curb the epidemic before it does massive damage to the Russian Federation's future.

In his statement to the recent session on AIDS at the UN General Assembly, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov said that the real numbers of HIV infected in this country may be 4 to 6 times higher than the official statistics 245,000. In other words, it is likely that there are already at least one million Russians living with HIV, and the total may be as high as one and a half million.

That represents between one and a quarter and two per cent of the adult population of Russia. It is clear that Russia is quickly moving into the front ranks of those countries across the world most affected by HIV. Outside Africa, there are only two countries where there are a million or more people living with HIV, and they are India and China with their respective billion-plus populations. Outside Africa and the Caribbean, only three Asian countries have reached adult prevalence over one per cent, together with the Ukraine, Estonia and now the Russian Federation.

Not has the epidemic stopped growing – all projections for the numbers likely to be infected with HIV over the coming years show totals of at least 5 million.

Evidently, HIV/ AIDS is a big problem for Russia.

My second point about why the Russian Federation needs to be concerned about AIDS was also highlighted at the UN General Assembly by Foreign Minister Ivanov, when he pointed out that it is **young people** who are most affected. That is so in many parts of the world, but it is especially so in the Russian Federation. The great majority – 85 per cent – of those living with HIV in the Russian Federation are under the age of thirty – two thirds are under twenty-five, and twenty per cent of the total are still teenagers.

The Russian Federation is already gripped by a demographic squeeze, with a negative birth rate. The country cannot afford to lose a generation decimated by AIDS.

The fact is that AIDS is not like other epidemics which break out for a couple of years and then disappear – having primarily affected the weak, children and the elderly. In contrast, HIV specifically targets people in their prime, in their most productive ages. It also strikes those in their most reproductive ages, spilling over into the next generation through transmission from mother-to-child, and leaving an orphan generation which is itself less economically and socially secure and so more vulnerable to HIV infections, thus perpetuating the epidemic in a vicious cycle.

Therefore, the World Bank in a recent report estimates that GDP in South Africa will decrease by a full 50% after three generations if efficient prevention is not implemented. Russia, an industrial and highly developed country, is not facing devastation on that scale, but the predicted economic impact is substantial nevertheless. For example, projections from the World Bank and Russian Federation AIDS Center show GDP 4% lower as a result of AIDS by 2010 and 10.5% lower by 2020, unless there are more efficient preventive measures taken than currently. Investments would decline 5.5% in 2010 and 14.5% in 2020.

Further, HIV/AIDS cannot be expected to disappear within the next few decades. We are still in the early stages of this epidemic. It is not predicted to peak until 2050. AIDS is different, and we cannot afford to think about the epidemic with the relatively short-term perspective we apply to other plagues. We must become used to thinking in terms of generations not in years or even decades.

For these reasons – because Russia's HIV epidemic is already sizable, because young people are selectively targeted by the disease, and because the impact of AIDS magnifies across the generations – it is vitally urgent that massive action take place **now** to curb the epidemic.

AIDS is undermining human security worldwide. In the worst affected areas – like the southern cone of Africa where there are seven countries in which more than one in five adults is HIV-infected – the deaths caused by AIDS has torn societies apart. Such countries may not survive as orderly organised nations in the long run but be phased out. Last year, there was a drought in southern Africa which might have been just a cyclical downturn in agricultural productivity, but because AIDS has so weakened the coping

resources of whole societies, massive starvation was imminent. It was only a major international relief effort co-ordinated by the United Nations that staved off disaster – but the main lesson was that we must start treating the underlying cause of food insecurity, namely the devastation caused by AIDS.

AIDS is a security issue, and requires a security response, on several levels – nationally to protect the very fabric of society and the structures that are the basis for a State, political, cultural, economic and administrative; internationally; in coordinating emergency development responses; and in relation to the uniformed services nationally.

Internationally, the joint UN programme on AIDS, UNAIDS, cooperates with the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations to ensure that peacekeeping operations can be used effectively as agents to boost efforts to fight AIDS, rather than contributing to the problem. This has included stationing AIDS and gender advisers with peacekeeping operations, so that forces, humanitarian workers and the communities they come in contact with will all be able to act together to break the link between conflict and HIV transmission.

Coordinated humanitarian efforts have emerged in southern Africa especially in response to the food security crisis, and a new model is emerging of 'emergency development' when the urgency of the needs created by AIDS are responded to, at the same as long-term development capacity is built as the only sustainable response to the epidemic.

But these international efforts need to be matched at national level, because AIDS has an immediate impact on uniformed services. The reality is that the age groups recruited into the uniformed services are also the prime targets for the spread of HIV. UNAIDS has estimated that average rates of HIV infection within armies tend to be from two to five times higher than those of the general population.

The evidence is that the Russian Federation is not immune from these trends. It has been reported that in the past two years, 10,000 young men have been released from military conscription on the grounds of HIV infection.

So what needs to be done to respond to AIDS in the Russian Federation, and globally, and to break the link between HIV and human insecurity?

The starting point is leadership. The world noticed when President Putin in his annual speech to the Parliament this year made specific mention of HIV/AIDS as one of the problems Russia needs to tackle, especially given its demographic consequences.

Adding to his message were the words of Foreign Minister Ivanov at the UN General Assembly when he said that "HIV is a pressing problem for Russia. We clearly realize what damage AIDS is causing to our country today and what woes it may bring in the future".

These statements of leadership should greatly boost the combined efforts of the Russian authorities at all levels of government to tackle AIDS, and they go beyond Russia's borders with the leadership exercised in the context of the plans of the Commonwealth of Independent States to devise and deliver an integrated strategy to combat AIDS in the region. However, the Russian people need to hear more about HIV/AIDS from the highest level: Frank and honest recognition of the impact of AIDS on society, and the steps that must be taken in response.

Leadership must be accompanied by resources. The world has discovered that half measures are simply not effective against this epidemic – only an all-out assault will be sufficient. Global resources to tackle AIDS have increased considerably in the past two years, including through the World Bank and the newest financial channel, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

The recently agreed World Bank Project against HIV/AIDS and Tuberculosis in the Russian Federation will deploy a total of USD 286 million, of which USD 150 million comes from the World Bank and the Russian national budget contributes USD 134 million.

Russia has contributed to the global financial effort against AIDS through its participation in the G-8, which has given impetus to these efforts, and in strong support for the Global Fund including a pledge of USD 20 million as announced by President Putin.

But external support, from the World Bank, or from proposals submitted to the Global Fund, is only part of the story. The universal lesson of success against the epidemic globally has been that strong national commitments of resources and human capacity are required for national AIDS efforts. National budget allocations can take the lead – by signalling a strong national priority, regional decision makers will also be encouraged to devote a sufficient amount of their budgets and their political capital, to the fight against AIDS. Therefore, it is mandatory for the success of controlling the epidemic not to decrease but rather to increase the domestic resources. Unfortunately, currently the total appropriation from federal and regional sources is far from enough. Ten times more would be needed in 2004 to prevent the further spread of HIV in the Russian Federation.

Leadership and resources, especially human resources, do not come only from the government sector. A robust and effective response to AIDS needs to bring government and civil society together. By strengthening the work and coordination of public organizations working on AIDS across Russia, and by developing effective working relationships with all levels of government, a national movement can be created which will defeat the threat of AIDS.

Every country, which has proved itself successful in controlling the HIV epidemic, has done so with the participation of strong civil society organisations. As UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said just a month ago to a group which included many heads of state “AIDS represents the greatest leadership challenge of our time -leadership among-but not

limited to-Heads of State” It needs “Leadership at every level of society – among faith based organizations, community groups and the private sector”. The establishment of the Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS which for the first time brings together government sectors, people living with HIV/AIDS and civil society organizations and the creation of the Russian NGO forum are very encouraging signs of such leadership emerging in Russia this year.

The agenda facing the Russian Federation in exercising leadership and in deploying increased resources to fight AIDS is clear. It needs to include a concerted attack on stigma and discrimination, which here, as elsewhere in the world, cripple effective responses. AIDS cannot be defeated by persecuting those most vulnerable to infection.

It needs to include a massive scaling up of prevention efforts at all levels of society, but especially among young people – to reduce the high vulnerability of young people, to enable and empower them to protect themselves against HIV infection through access to information, life skills, care and support services and prevention commodities. Immediate action must be taken to scale up harm reduction for the extraordinary large number of young people who inject drugs, regularly or occasionally. And it needs HIV treatment and care to be made universally available – the Russian Federation has an extensive health infrastructure which has proved itself hugely capable of tackling diseases in the past, and every effort must be made to ensure that AIDS treatment is successfully deployed – which will itself have a beneficial impact on efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

Mr Chairman and dear colleagues, a main concern is to achieve an understanding among leaders- may it be political, religious, cultural or business leaders- about the seriousness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the long-term consequences to the society; globally as well as nationally. It is not easy to the human mind to comprehend the full scope of the pandemic. It definitely goes above all what we have been used to. Scientists, health care workers and community leaders have a responsibility to communicate this to decision-makers as well as to the business sector and the public in order to raise awareness and make HIV/AIDS a priority.

I thank you for this opportunity to address you all, comrades-in-arms in the our fight against the scourge.