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**Press release**

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## **UN SECRETARY-GENERAL KOFI ANNAN LAUNCHES GLOBAL MEDIA AIDS INITIATIVE**

**New York, 15 January 2004** – As part of the ongoing mobilisation of civil society in the fight against HIV/AIDS, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan today met with leaders of some of the world's leading media organizations to launch a *Global Media AIDS Initiative*. The Initiative aims to activate media organizations to reach the world's people – especially youth - with information about how to prevent and treat HIV and to help combat AIDS-related stigma and discrimination.

Today's launch of the Global Media AIDS Initiative drew Presidents, CEOs and senior executives of over 20 media organizations from around the world. Peter Piot, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and Drew Altman, President and CEO of the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, whose organizations developed the Initiative, led sessions on the state of the global AIDS epidemic and the role that the media can play in combating the disease. Shashi Tharoor, United Nations Under Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information, facilitated a dialogue among participants. The meeting also received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Media represents an often overlooked and underutilized resource in the fight against the global AIDS epidemic. UNAIDS estimates that two-thirds of the 45 million new HIV infections projected to occur worldwide over the next decade could be stemmed with greater access to effective prevention and public education efforts.

“When you are working to combat a disastrous and growing emergency, you should use every tool at your disposal,” said Secretary-General Annan. “HIV/AIDS is the worst epidemic humanity has ever faced. It has spread further, faster and with more catastrophic long-term effects than any other disease. Its impact has become a devastating obstacle to development. Broadcast media have tremendous reach and influence, particularly with young people, who represent the future and who are the key to any successful fight against HIV/AIDS. We must seek to engage these powerful organizations as full partners in the fight to halt HIV/AIDS through awareness, prevention, and education.”

Current levels of knowledge and awareness of HIV/AIDS vary widely around the world but, even in some of the regions worst affected by the epidemic, a very large percentage of people have never heard of the disease. Recent studies have shown that in 21 African countries more than 60 per cent of girls were found to have at least one major misconception about the virus or were unaware of its existence. Widespread lack of knowledge is also evident in Latin America and the Caribbean. In a survey conducted in Bolivia, for example, 74 per cent of young women either did not know AIDS existed or harboured serious misconceptions about it. Surveys in 40 countries worldwide indicate that more than 50 per cent of young people aged 15 to 24 do not know how HIV is transmitted. In addition, stigmatisation and discrimination against people living with HIV continue to be among the greatest barriers to preventing the spread of new infections and to providing adequate care and support.

Today, the Secretary General has asked that major media companies commit to using their resources to expand public knowledge and understanding about HIV/AIDS. Specific efforts that media companies are encouraged to undertake include:

- Designating the fight against AIDS as an overall corporate priority;
- Committing substantial time and/or space to the issue, including programming/editorial and advertising;
- Providing current news coverage of the epidemic, both globally and locally;
- Supporting efforts to train reporters and producers to cover the epidemic;
- Supporting the development and broadcast of AIDS-related shows, films and documentaries;
- Making content addressing HIV/AIDS available rights-free to other media outlets;
- Providing comprehensive workforce education efforts about HIV.

Mr Annan noted that a number of the media organizations represented at the meeting have already contributed significantly to promoting public debate on AIDS and to promoting safer behaviours. They have found innovative and creative ways to reach audiences and provide them with crucial awareness and knowledge about HIV -- from soap operas to situation comedies, from concerts to documentaries, from children's programming to hard news. Several have already broadcast "AIDS seasons", featuring special programming on HIV/AIDS-related issues.

Other media organizations announced new commitments to develop AIDS programming and outreach through partnerships with other interested organizations, the United Nations, and non-governmental and community organizations. These partnerships will help multiply the weight and reach of the AIDS education message and ensure that information is disseminated as widely as possible. The Secretary-General urged the organizations to continue and accelerate these initiatives.

"The commitments made by the media organizations today are one of the most important collective contributions to the fight against AIDS to date," said Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director, an organizer of today's meeting. "By harnessing the media's unparalleled ability to communicate with billions of people around the world, we can now provide more people than ever with vital life-saving information on AIDS."

"For more than a decade, the Kaiser Family Foundation has worked with media companies in the US and globally to include HIV/AIDS public education messages into their programming that will resonate especially with young people and those who are most at risk. The new Global AIDS Media Initiative signals a new and expanded commitment by media leaders that will reach millions of more people with public health information," said Drew E. Altman, President and Chief Executive Officer, Kaiser Family Foundation.

In a number of countries, decades of development are being reversed by HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Some 40 million people are living with HIV or AIDS worldwide, with 5 million newly infected during 2003 alone. Last year, 3 million people died of AIDS, bringing the total number of deaths since the start of the epidemic to more than 20 million.

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