



Press release

UN LEADERS CALL FOR MORE ACTION AS SOUTHERN AFRICA ENTERS A CRITICAL PHASE

Johannesburg, 25 May 2005 – Three United Nations leaders today called for the world to refocus its attention on the chronic problems and humanitarian needs of millions of people in southern Africa, especially children.

United Nations Special Envoy James T. Morris, UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman and UNAIDS Executive Director Peter Piot warned that although great strides have been made by governments and the international community in meeting the most critical needs of the region, the ‘triple threat’ of HIV/AIDS, food insecurity, and the loss of human capacity is still stalking the region and more investment is needed if gains made over the last three years are to be sustained.

“Emergencies come and go, but we are now in an acute phase of a chronic problem and the effects of this are going to be with us for generations to come,” Morris said. “This is not about one issue or one country. Many factors are converging to undermine livelihoods of millions of people in southern Africa. The complexity of the situation demands that we must do all we can to help Governments in the region.”

Three years ago, at the height of the southern Africa crisis, many countries in the region did not have food security and access to treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS. In addition, many countries did not have programmes to target the growing crisis of orphans and other vulnerable groups.

Today, there has been a move to diversify crops and sources of income that has helped to mitigate the impact of erratic weather. Several countries now have action plans to create safety nets for the more than four million orphans and other vulnerable children across the region. Up to 176,000 people are now receiving anti-retroviral treatment in southern Africa. This could never have been achieved without a concerted effort by Governments, civil society, the UN system and the international community.

However, one million people are still not receiving these life-prolonging drugs. In addition, the current dry spell and crop failure across the region means that seven million people could need food assistance over the coming year. Final analysis from regional crop assessments is expected in early June.

The situation is already considered so serious that the United Nations Special Envoy held a review meeting Wednesday morning with ten country representatives from the United Nations system in southern Africa. The meeting examined current interventions, joint programming, UN reform, and the strategies to address the multiple impacts of the triple threat.

“It’s crucial that we reverse the downward spiral on child survival in this region. There are remarkable local initiatives across the region to prevent the spread of AIDS from mother to child,” Ms. Veneman said. “By expanding these successful models we can reduce the number of infants contracting HIV.” She added that treatment for HIV-positive children and adults is a critical element of the regional response. “Keeping more parents alive means fewer children orphaned by AIDS,” she said.

The three leaders emphasised the complexity of the triple threat. For example: without food, anti-retrovirals are less effective; without anti-retrovirals, children become orphans; and, without a healthy and educated next generation, southern Africa will have great difficulty breaking the cycle of poverty.

“Over twenty years into the epidemic, we know that an exceptional response is required,” said Dr Piot. “We are seeing this increasingly at all levels and especially in communities across the region. However, we need to make sure that HIV prevention, food security and HIV treatment are integrated into a comprehensive response. This is the only way to get ahead of the epidemic. We must aim for universal access to HIV prevention and treatment.”

The unprecedented nature of the crisis demands support and action from the international community to assist governments. While considerable funding is available through a variety of new channels to help address the HIV/AIDS pandemic, it is clear that funds alone will not secure lives and livelihoods. For example, Governments’ capacity has been eroded – due to illness, mortality and brain drain within the public workforce – creating a crisis of human resources.

“No one UN agency, no donor and no government can do this alone. This is about partnerships and putting everything we have into tackling this together and making the money work,” Morris said. “For the sake of the children of southern Africa we have to accelerate the momentum gained over the last three years, we can not afford to let them down.”