

**NOTES FROM THE UN PRESS BRIEFING BY STEPHEN LEWIS, SPECIAL ENVOY  
FOR HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA, NOON, MAY 2, 2003**

Just last weekend, I returned from a trip to Kenya, during which I met, at length, with the new President, and Ministers of Health, Education and Information. I also met with the leadership of the National AIDS Control Council, the UN country team, various representatives of civil society and People Living with HIV/AIDS, and made a trip to Kabera, the huge, sprawling, abject slum in Nairobi, to meet with over a hundred commercial sex workers, all of whom are involved in a program of HIV prevention.

While everyone I met and everything I encountered was fascinating, it's the political leadership I'd like to focus on for the purposes of this press briefing.

All too often, when I report back to the media after a visit to Africa, I'm consumed by gloom and apocalyptic utterance. But not this time. This time I came away with a greater degree of hope and optimism than I've felt for months. It's hard to describe the sense of change from the previous administration: suffice to say, where HIV/AIDS is concerned, the change is night and day. Where before, senior officials' attention to AIDS was perfunctory, on this occasion every conversation, without exception, demonstrated a new leadership that is intense, committed to confronting the pandemic, determined to put policies and programmes in place, and consumed by the recognition that every single family in Kenya is affected in some way by the ravages of HIV/AIDS.

I guess it's a trifle presumptuous to make personal comment on a conversation with President Kibaki, but I'm going to do so nonetheless. The President has appointed an HIV/AIDS Cabinet Committee of nine members, which he personally chairs. He's providing very open and public leadership on the issues of AIDS, and demands the same of his cabinet colleagues. What was particularly impressive --- and unusual --- in the meeting with the President (there were ten senior members of the bureaucracy present) was his refusal to accept, at face value, any reassurances that his administration has the pandemic well in hand. President Kibaki frequently challenged what others said, asserting --- almost by instinct --- that the crisis is far from under control, and insisting that the fight against the pandemic must be intensified.

It was one of the most refreshing meetings I've attended with a Head of State. We covered prevention, particularly in the schools; anti-retroviral drugs, financial resources, orphaned children, stigma, the role of religious communities, the role of parliamentarians in their constituencies, the effects on women and girls, the lifting of school fees and the question of prevalence rates. The discussion lasted well over an hour.

It was followed by a meeting with the Minister of Education. This is the arena where the full force of the new Government has been felt. As most people doubtless know, the key promise of the election campaign was the abolition of fees for primary school. No sooner was the present Government elected, than the promise was fulfilled. And an extraordinary thing happened: when school reconvened in January, 1.2 million new children poured into the educational system within one week --- an increase of over 20 per cent! --- and the numbers are still rising, expected to reach one and a half million by June.

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The implications are stunning. One million two hundred thousand children who had not been in school turned up for school. Kenya has an estimated one million two hundred thousand children orphaned by AIDS. Are they identical cohorts? Of course not. Is there a significant overlap? Everyone agrees that the overlap is large. What, then, is the situation on the rest of the continent for millions of other children orphaned by AIDS, particularly in the high prevalence countries? How is it possible that a campaign to eliminate school fees has not been launched across Africa? Where is the leadership to come from? Why should such vast numbers of children, who have lost one or both parents to AIDS, who have little if anything to eat, who have no guarantee of shelter, no guarantee of health or nutritional care, no guarantee of a home or of love or of nurture ... why on top of it all, should they be denied the right to go to school and the prospect of a future simply because they're impoverished? There's something truly dreadful about all of this.

If the experience of Kenya proves anything, it proves that those who have argued for the abolition of fees, as a way of liberating the lives of millions of children, were right. What is so distinctive about Kenya is the new Government's determination to see the lifting of fees as applicable to everything, including books, uniforms, or any extraneous levy. In the view of the Minister of Education, the policy is driven by the guarantees contained in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the internationally agreed principles of "Education for All".

In one instance, in an urban slum community many miles from Nairobi, the population of the primary school, after the fee announcement, jumped from one thousand to five thousand students. But when the Headmistress insisted that every child must come to school in a uniform, the numbers dropped to 2,600 --- a major revelation in itself. The Ministry of Education asserted that absolutely nothing, including uniforms, was to stand in the way of school attendance, and the numbers are moving back up.

I don't want to pretend for a moment that there isn't a very tough, hard slog ahead. The new government and the voters understood that abolishing school fees would be costly in financial terms, but the free education campaign slogan said it all: "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." The Ministry is scrambling to put together the dollars to finance the policy (a government task force announced in March that it would cost \$97.1 million through June, and another \$137.1 million through the 2003-2004 school year)... a major portion of it from the Kenyan national treasury, part of it from the World Bank, part of it from bilateral donors. And there are still areas of the country, particularly the nomadic North-East, where school attendance remains unacceptably low. Moreover, the urgent need physically to expand the school system, and to replenish the teaching profession, shredded by AIDS, is obviously overwhelming. But the Government is single-minded in its determination to guarantee the rights of every Kenyan child to education, and to prove, in the process, that the goal can be accomplished without sacrificing quality.

For the orphaned children of Kenya, the policy is a salvation. Why, then, is it not in place across the continent? The time has more than come to champion this cause with every Government, and to champion it with unrelenting tenacity. No one should forget that all of the governments in question have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, article 28 of which reads, in part: "Make primary education compulsory and available free to all".

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Let me now move to the Minister of Health. Again the conversation was illustrative of a Government determined to break the grip of the pandemic on Kenyan society. This Minister speaks with passionate clarity, knowledge and resolve about the need to proceed simultaneously on care, prevention and treatment. More, in a fashion with few parallels, this is a Minister who understands the appalling toll being taken on the women of her country, and the need to address their extreme vulnerability.

The Government of Kenya has just received money from the Global Fund. The \$56 million allocated to the next two years will help to provide anti-retroviral treatment for another three thousand Kenyans. There are roughly seven thousand in treatment now, mostly in the private sector, so that will bring the total to ten thousand. Already the new Government has set a target of 40,000 in treatment by the year 2005.

How will they achieve it? In four ways. First, the Government is examining legislation to introduce a National Health Insurance Plan. It is the intention of the Ministry of Health that treatment for opportunistic infections, and for full-blown AIDS, be covered, at least in part, by the Plan. In my respectful view, that's an astonishingly enlightened and courageous position, worthy of international support. Second, the Government hopes to persuade the private sector to further expand its coverage. Third, the Government has set aside, in this fiscal year, with increased recurrent funding in mind, the sum of \$4 million for laboratory infrastructure to address HIV/AIDS, and it is hoped that, inevitably, some of the money will be directed to treatment. Fourth, the Government is even now preparing its next proposal for the Global Fund, which will include financing for the treatment of another ten thousand people. In that regard, it should be added that the Government will wish to purchase generic drugs, from the WHO list of approved anti-retrovirals, probably from India, in order to keep the prices down. This, then, emphasizes yet again the desperate urgency of adequate resources for the Global Fund.

While all of these intentions are truly exciting, and a dramatic departure from the previous administration, it must be pointed out that over two million people are living with the virus in Kenya, and it is estimated that two hundred thousand would qualify for immediate treatment. As always, the gap between need and reality is measured in the appalling foreshortening of hundreds of thousands of lives. With additional resources, Kenya could treat thousands more. With additional resources and a transfer of technology, Kenya could establish an indigenous capacity to manufacture anti-retroviral drugs. When will the resources come? When will the needless carnage end?

Finally, a word about the Minister of Information. He's about to take a very unusual step. Using the authority granted to him under the Broadcasting legislation, he will direct that a certain limited percentage of air time, on all radio and television stations, be devoted to programming on AIDS prevention. It's a move that will undoubtedly attract criticism, but just as in the case of his colleagues, the Minister is unshakeable.

It's hard to convey the startlingly changed atmosphere in the political precincts of Nairobi and by extension, in the population overall. If ever there was a time to turn the pandemic around in Kenya, that time is now. There is no reason in the world, given the commitment of the new Government to tackle HIV/AIDS, why Kenya cannot become the next Uganda. But they'll need lots of help: they must get it.