

PRESS BRIEFING BY SPECIAL ENVOY FOR HIV/AIDS IN AFRICA
NOON PRESS BRIEFING, UN, FEBRUARY 28, 2002

The AIDS pandemic in Africa could be contained and defeated if adequate financial resources could be mobilized, Stephen Lewis, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Africa told correspondents at a Headquarters press briefing yesterday.

Briefing journalists on his recent trip to 11 African countries, he said "There is simply no doubt in my mind whatsoever that the pandemic can be defeated. We know so many of the answers that if we could summon the financial resources we could turn this pandemic around." Infrastructure needed to be improved, but there was so much that could be done now. "If we could summon the financial resources, I think we would save literally millions of lives and prolong millions of others and turn the pandemic around," he added.

He said that because of the lack of resources in many African nations, they were increasingly dependent on the expectations of the Global Fund. "It seems to me that this places upon the donor nations a very considerable requirement and obligation to meet the targets which the Secretary-General has set of seven to \$10 million a year [for the Global Fund on AIDS]", Mr. Lewis said.

He said the upcoming Monterrey Conference on Financing for Development next month and the G-8 conference in Canada in June were very critical events which would shed light on whether donor nations could provide the money to support the Global Fund to make the fight against AIDS possible for many African countries. African countries, he said, were filled with hope.

Mr. Lewis noted that, as a recent commission on macroeconomic health had demonstrated, the disease burden in many African countries was so high that unless health problems were dealt with first, there could be no economic growth. In a country like Namibia, which was not eligible for many World Bank or International Development Agency (IDA) loans or grants, the Global Fund became a particular imperative, he said.

He said there was a tendency now in viewing the AIDS pandemic in Africa to draw attention to Uganda, Senegal and Zambia as countries where the prevalence rate was dropping. He cited two recent comprehensive Sentinel site studies carried out in Kenya and Namibia, which showed a decline of 14 to 13 per cent across the board for Kenya and a stabilization of the rates over the last two years for the age group 15 to 24 for Namibia.

"These are not overwhelming figures, but they tend to demonstrate in a very positive way that prevention works", he said. The pandemic could clearly be contained with Herculean effort, and the figures in both Kenya and Namibia were significant signs of hope.

But Mr. Lewis repeated that without adequate resources, the battle would not be won. The pervasiveness of death had not only overtaken some of the African countries, shattering their infrastructure and society, but had also created a depth of awareness which was irreversible. He singled out three

issues he said were increasingly intrusive in the war on AIDS in Africa. One was the "desperate" shortage of food, which he said caused him to think about the possibility of the World Food Programme (WFP) extending its mandate to deal urgently with school feeding programmes in areas where food was needed. The second was the requirement to pay school fees which was "prejudicing

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the lives of tens of thousands, probably hundreds of thousands” of orphans who could not afford to pay school fees.

Calling that a direct violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Mr. Lewis said: “This is an astonishing commentary on the perverse way in which this world works. School fees didn’t come into place until many of the structural adjustment programmes were embraced in the late eighties and early nineties when cost-sharing and user fees became a certain fetish. Now in 2002 the need to pay school fees and the lack of money to pay them means that many of these children are living lives without joy or opportunity.”

Thirdly, there was an increasing demand in Africa for the female condom, and according to a number of prototype tests and projects undertaken so far, the female condom had generally become more and more demanded and less and less available. That was because of the power that it gave to the woman, he added.

Answering a correspondent’s question, Mr. Lewis said the mortality figures in sub-Saharan Africa were estimated at 4 million in 1999, 3.8 million in 2000 and 3.4 million in 2001. He said the decline in the numbers of deaths in the three-year period was attributable in part to the work that was being done, and in part to the fact that the most susceptible population had already been terribly infected. “But the numbers are still terribly frightening,” he said.

To another question, he said he anticipated that the world, having increasingly come alive to the problem, was more and more mobilized to respond. “If the world responds adequately, it seems to me that Africa is ready to take advantage of that response. There was a long period of denial, a long period of passivity, a long period of immobility. That is over. There is determination to respond and all of them are frustrated by a lack of resources,” he said.

The deadline for receiving proposals to the Global Trust Fund on AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis has been set as 10 March, he said. Between \$800 million and \$1 billion will be disbursed this year, he said. The distribution of the funds was expected to be announced towards the end of April following a review of all the proposals received.

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