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**Programme Coordinating Board of UNAIDS
and launch of the publication: *“Common Goal, Shared
Responses: A Case Study of the Pan Caribbean
Partnership Against HIV/AIDS”***

December 13, Montego Bay, Jamaica

**Speech by
Right Honorable Owen Seymour Arthur,
Prime Minister of Barbados**

Hon. Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines
Ministers of Government
Sir George Alleyne, United Nations Special Envoy to the Caribbean on HIV and
AIDS and Chancellor of the University of the West Indies
Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on
HIV/AIDS
Dr. Edward Greene, Caribbean Community Assistant Secretary-General
Members of the expert panel
Members of the Programme Coordinating Board of UNAIDS
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen
Members of the media:

Returning to Jamaica always restores warm memories of my years spent in this wonderful isle; of lifelong friendships, of the experiences which so profoundly shaped my view of the world; memories of a generous people and a vibrant civilization. You may sense that I am obviously glad to be here. And were it possible for me to relive, in the same order and to the same extent, the pleasures which I enjoyed here in the 1970's, with an absolute minimum of effort. I could be persuaded to return.

First, let me thank the Government of Jamaica and the Executive Director of UNAIDS for inviting me to participate in this historic launch of the PANCAP best practice document entitled "*A Study of the PANCAP: Common goals, Shared responses*".

As we meet here today, it bears reflection that this is the holiday season, a time of rejoicing, of family gatherings, of feeling at peace with our loved ones and of counting our blessings.

Yet, the joy that is traditionally associated with the Holiday Season is markedly subdued as this year draws to a close, if for no other reason than that so many of our brothers and sisters throughout the Region who have succumbed to AIDS will not share the Spirit of the Season with us.

We must ensure that their deaths were not in vain.

Today's gathering therefore, reflects a courageous determination to save those who cannot save themselves, and to alter the manner in which we relate to our regional family. And at a time when we are on the cusp of fundamentally altering how the regional family relates to the regional economy, it is good that we should remind ourselves that there is also an imposing regional social agenda that has also to be fully met. The fight against HIV/AIDS and the work of PANCAP are vital parts of that social agenda.

My relationship with PANCAP dates back to its inception in 2001. In fact, Dr. Eddie Greene, the CARICOM Assistant Secretary-General, often generously credits me with the responsibility for the authorship of the idea for such a partnership.

It would be remiss of me if I failed to publicly recognise the central role played by UNAIDS in mainstreaming HIV and AIDS as an agenda item at all ministerial meetings, and thus raising the consciousness of this disease among decision-makers.

At the meeting of the Caribbean Group on Cooperation in Economic Development (CGCED) at the World Bank headquarters in Washington, D.C. in June 2000. Our awareness of the devastation of this disease was strongly influenced by a presentation which painted a disturbing picture of the growing impact of HIV and AIDS on life in selected Caribbean countries. The message was clear.

It could no longer be business as usual and our regional responses had to be crafted with alacrity, with a new strength and with a deeper purpose in mind.

Shortly after that at the CARICOM Heads of Government meeting, the enormity of the developmental impact of this disease was not only recognised.

The Heads committed to implement programmes aimed at significantly reducing the socio-economic impact of HIV on our populations.

My personal commitment took the form of the undertaking that the Government of Barbados should host a special Regional Conference on HIV/AIDS involving donor agencies, where the idea for the *Pan-Caribbean Partnership on AIDS* was mooted.

Recognising that the success in reducing the incidence of HIV infection throughout the region is directly related to the demonstration of political commitment at the highest level, my respected colleague, Dr. Denzil Douglas, Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, willingly agreed to assume lead responsibility for HIV and AIDS. May I add that he has provided outstanding service to the Region in this capacity.

One of the recommendations emanating from the earlier panel discussion was the need for the Region to adopt the UNAIDS principles of the "Three Ones" - principles which state that there should be one national authority, one strategic framework to govern the implementation of programmes and one central monitoring and evaluation system.

In May 2001, I took a decision to transfer the coordination of the National AIDS Programme from the Ministry of Health into the Office of the Prime Minister.

It has been our experience in Barbados that managing the Programme in the Office of the Prime Minister reinforces these concepts. May I venture to suggest that this reorganisation should be adopted as "best practice" throughout the Region.

We may even wish to revisit how we do our business at the regional level in the light of our commitment to the principles of the "Three Ones". Indeed, PANCAP may want to reflect on the evolving disconnect between having the Council for Human and Social Development (COHSOD), which has a primarily health focus, taking the lead responsibility for HIV and AIDS as opposed to the Heads of Government under whose purview developmental issues should rightly fall.

My Government has especially recognised the need to pay close attention to Priority Area #1 in the Caribbean Regional Strategic Framework - that of promoting human rights and the banishing of stigma and discrimination. Throughout the Caribbean, people living with HIV and AIDS face hostility meted out by their brothers and sisters in their communities.

This is sadly still the case in Barbados. It is the sphere where progress is most rapidly needed and can most rapidly be achieved.

For as, the UN HIV Special Envoy for the Caribbean, Sir George Alleyne, in a recent interview noted "we are not genetically programmed to discriminate. Discrimination is a learned behaviour".

Our efforts to redress AIDS-related stigma and discrimination must focus on enabling our HIV and AIDS community to be involved in every aspect of national life. An aggressive human rights campaign, launched for World AIDS Day this year, under the theme "Protect Human Rights, Embrace Tolerance" is another strategy that must be fully seen through.

In my country we are committed to going further. We have allocated funding to establish a Register to record and investigate all instances of discrimination experienced by persons living with HIV and AIDS.

PANCAP has started to address this difficult area through legislative review and education. Methods however are needed which move beyond the emotional and moral dimensions to recognize the developmental price we shall pay for marginalising of vulnerable groups, perpetuating fear, encouraging denial of the sex trade, and self-righteously indulging in homophobia.

Over the past two years, PANCAP has broken new ground by negotiating reduced prices for antiretroviral therapies with major pharmaceutical companies. However, these drugs still remain too expensive for most of us. International assistance and support are urgently needed to ensure wider access to treatment, and to help build the capacity to deliver these treatments effectively.

As we move to a higher plane of regional economic integration in 2005, PANCAP must build new capacity to address the diversity of the Caribbean Region. For we are a Region where consideration will have to be taken of the circumstances of Haiti in equal measure to those of Aruba, of Cuba, that of Grenada and Montserrat to Guyana. We need to have a consciousness within PANCAP that embraces the entirety of the Caribbean as its theatre of immediate relevance.

For, AIDS knows no geo-political boundaries. Indeed as we proceed to the CSME, this Region will be characterized by highly mobile populations whose movements - driven by factors that straddle economic and social issues, will place us at greater risk for transmitting this deadly virus.

It is imperative for us to build on our history of regional cooperation as exemplified in existing functional cooperation in the areas of health, economics and education, to develop new modalities of cooperation in the fight against HIV/AIDS to ensure that its spread does not become one of the unintended byproducts of the CSME itself.

As it is, the task before us is already very testing.

In the Caribbean, there are about 78,000 people living with AIDS, and fewer than five percent of them have access to effective treatment.

This is an unacceptable situation.

In Barbados we are fortunate to have been able to put together the resources to scale up our treatment and care programme and provide therapy to all HIV-positive Barbadians. After the first full year of this Programme, we have witnessed an overall reduction in deaths of clinic-registered patients by approximately 56 percent and total hospital days fell by approximately 60 percent.

Our access to resources however may not be mirrored elsewhere or everywhere. The majority of small-island developing states, dependencies and mainland territories in the Caribbean are ranked as lower- or middle- income developing countries. All have encountered difficulties in attracting significant bilateral and multi-lateral funding to scale-up their national programmes.

To deny these countries the opportunity to access either funding or affordable drug prices on the basis of their GDP and/or GNI, is to hinder their ability to respond effectively to the epidemic at a time when it is most appropriate for them so to do. Such an investment **now** would yield its highest return.

The time has never been more appropriate for PANCAP to turn its attention to building capacity, not just at the regional level, but at the level of country, in order to enable it to function effectively in the new role of facilitating an expanded regional response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

With the substantial new funding that has been approved from the Global Fund and the World Bank for the Region, PANCAP must identify new strategies to provide technical support to countries in the most effective and efficient manner.

In the fight against HIV/AIDS, as in relation to all of the struggles in which the Caribbean is engaged, we must continue to search for and believe in happy endings. Strengthened by PANCAP, and its philosophy of Common Goals and Shared Responses, I do believe we stand on the threshold of a new era of enlightenment and understanding that will bring to the Caribbean the greatest gift of all - a society where stigma and discrimination have been dethroned and replaced by compassion and tangible care for all of those infected and affected by the HIV/AIDS virus.

At HIV and AIDS meetings, we now speak of national strategies, multisectoral plans, improving access to treatment and care, actively involving People Living with HIV and AIDS in every aspect of dealing with this epidemic. We understand the linkages between poverty and HIV and AIDS. We speak authoritatively about Human Rights, Stigma and Discrimination, the disproportionate effect of the disease on women both in terms of incidence and impact on them as bread winners and primary care givers. The economic realities have galvanised us to stem the loss of our greatest resource - our people.

As we attend this function, we are a more informed people, striving for better medical breakthroughs and outcomes. We are a more conscious people implementing the required legislative and institutional arrangements to effect positive change. These are commendable things. They bring with them a "feel good factor" and unfortunately, in some cases they absolve us from looking further.

But, I put it to you that we must look further and deeper. We must examine all of these worthy actions against the simple principles of love, fellowship, charity, compassion and the overriding hope for a brighter tomorrow - a better tomorrow for all of us. And this examination has to start at the most difficult level. It has to start with ourselves - our attitudes and our behaviours.

And I say this is because, the stark reality is that even though we are more informed and better educated about how HIV and AIDS is spread, we are still witnessing unacceptable levels of new infections.

Even though we are aware that HIV and AIDS knows no geo-political boundaries and is no respecter of persons, we still shun those among us who are living with the disease, or those we feel have the potential to contract and spread it. Stigma and discrimination is alive and well It is flourishing.

Unless we are prepared to challenge ourselves to do better, we cannot morally challenge others to do so. If we cannot extend the hand of compassion to those adults who are living with this disease and struggle with negative societal responses as a daily feature of their lives, how can we even begin to reach out to the children and orphans who also face these challenges?

What examples are we setting for our children and youth if intolerance becomes the defining standard? Sadly, we are already grappling with the effects of intolerance in other areas of our societies.

If HIV is no longer a death sentence medically, how can we allow it to be so socially? To do so would be to give the lie to one of the things we hold most dear - that we are truly progressive democratic societies.

We must address our ingrained fears and prejudices head on. We must resist the temptation to judge because a certain lifestyle does not suit us. Do we know what we would do if we were walking in that person's shoes?

As a Caribbean People we fully understand the potentially soul-destroying effects of vulnerability and the prejudices that sometimes accompany it. We face it daily as small states battling for survival with trade liberalisation, the increasing prevalence and intensity of natural disasters, rising oil prices and fierce competition in tourism and the export of sugar and bananas.

Even with the creation of the CARICOM Single Market and Single Economy, the vulnerability of the smaller economies is an issue and prejudice born of insularity is raising its ugly head. We must not let intolerance prevent us from seeking to attain this important goal.

In the same vein, we must forbid prejudice from colouring our actions when dealing with those who are living with HIV and AIDS. Instead we must resolve to become a more caring and compassionate people and lead the world by example. In every sphere we must become our brother's keeper.

As we return to our respective countries at the end of this important exercise and enjoy this festive season, I ask you to take a little time for quiet reflection on how far we have come in the HIV and AIDS fight and how far we have left to go. And in so doing, I trust that you will recommit yourselves to the common goals of love, charity, compassion, fellowship and trust and that our shared responses will lead to a brighter tomorrow and a better future for all.

It is with this expectation that it is therefore now my distinct honour to launch the PANCAP Best Practice Document, "A Study of the PANCAP: Common goals, Shared Responses", in the hope it will come to stand for the positive influence it is intended to be on the conduct of our affairs in this matter which so strongly binds us together.

I thank all concerned for giving me the opportunity to be part of a Cause that is larger than myself - in being a Champion for Change.

I am obliged to you.