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UN Secretary-General, Naomi Watts, Kenneth Cole, Oscar Winner Susan Sarandon and Others Highlight Human Rights at World AIDS Day “LIGHT FOR RIGHTS” Event in New York City

New York (December 1, 2009) - Commemorating [World AIDS Day 2009](#), lights on the historic Washington Square Park Memorial Arch and other landmarks in New York City are being turned off at 6:15 pm tonight at an event to remember those lost to AIDS, and turned back on to emphasize human rights for those living with HIV/AIDS around the globe.

Speakers at the event include United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon; Kenneth Cole, chairman, Kenneth Cole Productions and chairman, board of trustees, amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research; Naomi Watts, Oscar-nominated actress and UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador; Christine C. Quinn, Speaker of the New York City Council; Cheyenne Jackson, currently starring in the Broadway show *Finian's Rainbow*; Oscar winner and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador Susan Sarandon, Dr. Paul DeLay, Deputy Executive Director of UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS); and Tembeni Fazo, originally from Zimbabwe and now a counselor and educator for HIV-positive African and Caribbean immigrants in New York. The featured musical performer is Tony Award winner Lillias White, who is starring in the new Broadway show *FELA!*.

The event is part of a series of global activities marking World AIDS Day, and it is launching the global LIGHT FOR RIGHTS Campaign organized by amfAR, UNAIDS, Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS, and the World AIDS Campaign. Inspiration for the event comes from “Night Without Light,” a project undertaken in 1990 by Visual AIDS, a group dedicated to using the arts to bring attention to the AIDS crisis—and the same group that created the red ribbon symbol for AIDS awareness.

“On World AIDS Day this year, our challenge is clear: we must continue doing what works, but we must also do more, on an urgent basis, to uphold our commitment to reach universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010,” the Secretary-General said. “This goal can be achieved only if we shine the full light of human rights on HIV. AIDS responses do not punish people; they protect them.”

Kenneth Cole, who serves as master of ceremonies, said, “We’re here tonight to shine a light on the human rights that are so central to the success of the fight against AIDS. And we’re here to recommit ourselves to bringing an end to the global AIDS epidemic.” Cole has been a prominent supporter of AIDS awareness and research since 1985—the first fashion icon to become so involved.

The Washington Square Park Memorial Arch is just one of many such landmarks around New York City that are dimming their lights and then re-illuminating them this evening. Other participating venues include the Chrysler Building; Rockefeller Center; Lincoln Center, including the Metropolitan Opera, Avery Fisher Hall, the David H. Koch Theater and the Revson Fountain; the MetLife Building; Madison Square Garden; the Beacon Theatre; 33 Broadway theaters; and Radio City Music Hall.

In her remarks, Naomi Watts said, “It has been both unfortunate and unfair for HIV infection to be considered a shameful disease, for people living with HIV to be judged as blameworthy, and for AIDS to be equated with certain death. I have personally seen that dignity and hope have been strongest among those whose lives were changed by HIV.” As UNAIDS Goodwill Ambassador, Watts has used her celebrity status to raise AIDS awareness and give a greater voice to the needs of people living with HIV.

Ms. Sarandon recalled the long struggle against stigma and isolation facing people living with HIV, and said that ensuring respect for human rights is essential. Ms. Faso said, “Having gone through the ordeal of testing positive in 2001, I accumulated the strength, compassion, courage and wisdom to enhance the life of others living with HIV.”

Concluding the event, Paul DeLay said, “UNAIDS is excited to participate in the launch of this two-year campaign to shine a light on the importance of human rights for achieving universal access. If we shine a human rights light on people with AIDS, they can emerge from the darkness to gain access to treatment, information, care and support to allow them to live normal lives.”

According to new data released in the UNAIDS [2009 AIDS epidemic update](#), new HIV infections have fallen 17% over the past eight years. But the update also reported that 33.4 million people worldwide are living with HIV—the highest number ever, as people are living longer due mainly to the beneficial effects of antiretroviral therapy. Despite people living longer lives, however, the report noted that 2.7 million people were newly infected in 2008, and 2 million people died of AIDS-related illness during that year.

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UNAIDS is an innovative joint venture of the United Nations, bringing together the efforts and resources of the UNAIDS Secretariat and ten UN system organizations in the AIDS response. The Secretariat headquarters is in Geneva, Switzerland—with staff on the ground in more than 80 countries. The Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Contributing to achieving global commitments to universal access to comprehensive interventions for HIV prevention, treatment, care and support is the number one priority for UNAIDS. Visit the UNAIDS website at www.unaids.org

[amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research](#), is one of the world's leading nonprofit organizations dedicated to the support of AIDS research, HIV prevention, treatment education, and the advocacy of sound AIDS-related public policy. Since 1985, amfAR has invested nearly \$290 million in its programs and has awarded grants to more than 2,000 research teams worldwide.