



United Nations



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CONTINUE STRUGGLE AGAINST PANDEMIC, PANELLISTS URGE

AT PRESS CONFERENCE TO MARK WORLD AIDS DAY

Marking the twentieth anniversary of World AIDS Day at the Financing for Development Conference in Doha, Qatar, a panel of experts this morning urged the international community to continue to fight the scourge despite the current financial crisis.

“Our dream is not to say ‘Yes, we can’, but ‘Yes, we did it,’ ” said Luisa Morgantini, Vice-President of the European Parliament. The regional legislature remained strongly committed to the struggle against AIDS and it was to be hoped that coordinated international efforts would keep that commitment not only on AIDS, but also other endemic diseases, the fight against which was crucial to development.

Accompanying her at the press conference were Trevor Manuel, Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for the Conference and Finance Minister of South Africa; Joel Nhleko, Permanent Representative of Swaziland to the United Nations; Laila Isharair of the General Secretariat for Development Planning and a member of the Qatar National AIDS Committee; Christoph Benn of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and Renu Chahil-Graf of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

Dr. Benn noted that, despite great progress in the areas of prevention and treatment, the fight against AIDS remained a moral and survival obligation that should not be slowed by the financial crisis. The Global Fund had committed more than \$14 billion to the struggle since its creation in 2002, but it faced a funding gap of \$8 billion. Two million people had been put on antiretroviral treatment with millions more having been treated for tuberculosis and millions of orphans under care. However, millions more remained untreated and without care.

Describing the situation in his heavily-affected country, Mr. Nhleko said that while infection rates had declined in Swaziland -- the high point of 40 per cent prevalence had been reduced to 26 per cent -- many people were infected daily, which remained a matter of great concern. Many families had lost their breadwinners and many others had been impoverished by spending on medical treatment and funerals. The economy suffered from a lack of productivity as the country had lost much of its labour force. Swaziland also lacked health workers in addition to having about 100,000 orphans out of a population of one million.

As a response, the country spent a large amount of its resources on raising awareness, voluntary testing and counselling, he said. Swaziland was reorienting spending toward the social sector while taking local culture into account, for example, by encouraging sexual abstinence in a culturally-specific way. AIDS programmes were being mainstreamed into many sectors, and more

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money was being spent on drugs and prevention. A raft of social projects for orphans had also been created.

Mr. Manuel said the issue of HIV was at the heart of the development challenge and should be considered together with access to water, sanitation and food. Finance ministers must ensure that all programmes were run in a “full-spectrum” manner and supported treatment regimes, after-care as well as care for orphans, widows and others left behind.

Describing Qatar’s efforts, Dr. Isharair said a Government committee had been established alongside a strategy created in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to encompass both prevention and services for those living with HIV. The disease was not highly prevalent in Qatar and the most important thing was that a law had been drafted to protect the rights of those living with the virus.

Dr. Chahil-Graf added that even given the low prevalence in the Gulf region, it was important to address HIV/AIDS because of an increase in the factors for infection, such as drug use and migration. While the exact figures were unknown due to underdeveloped surveillance systems, measures were being taken in the region, including the training of imams in awareness-raising. Groups for people living with HIV had also been formed, among other positive steps that needed to be encouraged.

Asked what the United Nations system was doing to counter the sex trade and satellite television channels that promoted risky lifestyles that could increase the spread of HIV, Dr. Chahil-Graf stressed the importance of applying all prevention strategies in countering the dangers of HIV spreading through prostitution. Dr. Isharair added that UNDP programmes were dealing with that issue and that there was a need to raise awareness. In Qatar, that was being done through mosques, schools and universities.

In response to a question about Swaziland’s efforts to analyze gender-disaggregated data, Mr. Nhleko said statistics showed that HIV was more prevalent among women than men. As for polygamy and the spread of HIV, the emphasis of awareness-training was on getting all parties involved to remain faithful to each other.

Asked about universal access to HIV treatment, Dr. Benn said 3.5 million people were on treatment, which was 35 per cent of people who needed it. Dr. Chahil-Graf described the extensive efforts to protect the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS, adding that those efforts would be ramped up in the years to come.

On the need for strong health systems that would allow better handling of HIV/AIDS problems, Mr. Manuel said it was true that countries had to deal with a much wider set of health problems, adding that a wider sociological discourse was required.