



BELGIUM

High Level Meeting on AIDS

Statement by H.E. Yves LETERME,
Prime Minister of Belgium

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Mr President, Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The fight against Aids requires strong, global players and international leadership. The United Nations, and, within the UN System, UNAIDS, play a leading role in this global battle, a role which Belgium wholeheartedly supports. On this tenth anniversary of our common declaration of commitment in this battle, I want to pay a heartfelt tribute to the outstanding work of my compatriot Peter Piot, who has developed and led UNAIDS for 11 years. His tireless commitment contributed to the strong global response to Aids and increased spending to combat the epidemic. I would like also to pay tribute to the leadership of Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon and of actual Executive Director Michel Sidibé.

Our common investments are bearing fruit. Thanks to our united efforts, the number of new infections decreased by almost 20% during the last ten years, and access to anti-retroviral treatment expanded to millions of people in low and middle income countries.

Belgium fully endorses the recommendations and targets outlined in the new UNAIDS Strategy, and in the report of the UN Secretary General « Uniting for universal access: towards zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero Aids-related deaths ».

For this ambitious goals, we have a long way to go. But we can do it, step by step, just as we have managed to control other diseases, thanks to a combination of scientific research, generosity in international cooperation, and political will.

Mr. President, I'd like to start with the last factor. Our common priority is to stop the further spread of Aids, and to help those who are infected. This priority is to a large extent a matter of human rights, of respect for the dignity and integrity of each human being. This means, a matter of political will.

Indeed, how can we be serious about prevention of Aids if we continue to tolerate a worldwide trade in which children, girls and women are sold in sexual slavery and become, first, helpless victims and then, transmitters of the infection? How can we be serious about

prevention if we tolerate traditions which deny women and girls dignity and equality, which deny girls and women physical integrity and authority over their own body? How can we be serious about prevention if people do not have enough respect for their partner to engage in safe sex? Sexual violence in any form can never be condoned in the name of culture. It is violence. As such it is morally objectionable. And on the practical level, this lack of regard for other human beings is a factor in the spread of Aids.

Another part of our common action is to help those who are infected. There is as yet not a cure for Aids. But a combination of treatments can block the infection, allow HIV infected people to lead normal lives, and stop the transmission of the infection.

There again, helping the victims is a matter of human rights. All people must have equal access to the necessary health care. Discrimination on the basis of factors as gender, creed, colour, or sexual preference is morally unacceptable, and is, on the practical level, counterproductive. Similarly, stigmatising HIV infected people is unacceptable, and will worsen the epidemic, because infected people

will be afraid to acknowledge their infection and to seek help.

In all these matters, Mr. President, political will is of paramount importance to guarantee the personal integrity of all human beings, and to guarantee equality of access to all necessary health counselling and to the best available health care.

The facts bear out my argument. In spite of our common successes, UN reports show that, for every person starting treatment, two are newly infected. This means that around 7.000 people become newly infected with HIV every single day. Among them, there are 3.000 young people and 1.000 children, which demonstrates again how much the most vulnerable members of our societies are at risk. Protecting the most vulnerable members of our societies, Mr. President, is the first and foremost duty of every government, every political authority worthy of that name.

Universal, non discriminatory access to therapy will have a preventive effect. This was again clearly established by a recent study showing the importance that Anti Retroviral Therapy can play in preventing

transmission by more than 95%. This proves that prevention, treatment, care and support are inextricably connected.

An integrated approach of course also includes investment in the research, development and delivery of new prevention tools, and of accessible and affordable HIV-medicines, particularly for children.

In Belgium the private sector, research institutions and universities have played a pivotal role in the research and development of new prevention technologies and HIV-medicines. A Belgian pharmaceutical company granted a royalty-free license for its antiretroviral component to develop, manufacture and distribute the compound as a microbicide in resource-poor countries. Only two weeks ago the American Food and Drug Administration approved a promising one a day pill for hiv treatment developed by a Belgian company.

Mr President, a third important factor in the fight against the aids epidemic, next to political will and scientific research, is generosity amongst our countries.

Being a global issue, fighting Aids is a global responsibility. Governments, the civil society, the private sector, the research institutions, the aids infected people : we are all in this together.

Belgium is firmly committed to do its part on the international level. From 2008 to 2010 the part of our official development that was specifically targeted for combating aids increased from 34.6 to 46.5 million euro. Development aid with an aids component amounted to 404 million euro in 2010. In terms of our contribution to UNAIDS and the Global Fund, we rank 10th worldwide for the first and 13th for the second. Important financial commitments are taken by the Government of Flanders, under an agreement with UNAIDS.

In our international cooperation and within the UN system we should not only look at increased contributions. It is just as important to further improve the efficiency and accountability of the existing means. Donor coordination, alignment and national appropriation should ensure that the means which are mobilized on a global scale do indeed reach the populations in need.

Mr. President, on this tenth anniversary of the declaration which gave such a strong impulse to the world wide combat against aids, we can look back on important results. We should not be discouraged by the much longer road which remains to be travelled. It depends on our common will to start taking further strides in the second decennium of our common commitment. If this conference is a starting point for those new steps, it will be worth holding and worth remembering. Belgium wants to remain a strong partner in this endeavour.

I thank you for your attention.