

1 December 2003

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,
on World AIDS Day**

Today is World AIDS Day. It would have been uplifting, on this Day, to report that the world has made remarkable progress towards halting and reversing the deadly and devastating HIV/AIDS pandemic. The reality, however, is much different. On 25 November 2003, UNAIDS launched its AIDS Epidemic Update 2003, bringing to our attention the latest developments on this pandemic - the news is not good. Far from abating the epidemic is worsening.

Staggering statistics continue to paint a very grim picture. At the end of 2002, some 38.6 million adults and 3.2 million children were living with HIV/AIDS. Half of the people infected with HIV are infected before they are twenty-five and die from AIDS before they are thirty-five. Orphaned children are a serious consequence of the tragedy - some experts say that 28 million will be orphaned by HIV/AIDS in the next decade. It is particularly disturbing that 95 percent of the more than 42 million people living with HIV/AIDS live in the developing world.

When we place these statistics in the context of critical but onerous health costs, declining financial flows, the challenges of globalisation and trade liberalisation, economic stagnation and slow growth rates, and above all, the impact on the productive work force, what is at stake for developing countries seriously affected by HIV/AIDS, particularly those in Africa, the Caribbean and increasingly in Asia, becomes evident.

While the enormity of the HIV/AIDS problem in the developing world cannot be overstated, this deadly pandemic knows no boundaries - no country or region is immune from it. The scope, extent and impact of HIV/AIDS make it a highly complex problem, touching on issues of health, human rights, poverty, social cohesion, and socio-economic development. Addressing these issues requires a global response. This is the approach to which we committed ourselves at the United Nations Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, and which we embodied in the United Nations Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS and at the High-level Plenary on HIV/AIDS in 2003. It also underpins our undertaking in the Millennium Declaration to halt and reverse the spread of the disease.

The Theme for World AIDS Day 2003, Stigma and Discrimination, focuses our attention on the personal tragedy of those infected with HIV/AIDS and on their families. Isolation, marginalisation and discrimination against those affected and against their families constitute a major obstacle to effective HIV/AIDS prevention and care. The world community cannot make progress against this deadly pandemic as long as we hold such prejudices. We must, through education and public awareness, clear away misconceptions that distort our understanding of the

nature of the disease and confront stigma and discrimination so that we can meet our obligations to those who so desperately need our support. We must implement the declaration, conventions, treaties and agreements on human right and fundamental freedoms in respect of people living with HIV/AIDS.

There are some encouraging developments, in the midst of the HIV/AIDS crisis. The pandemic is no longer shrouded in secrecy - increasingly countries are meeting the crisis head on. The World Health Organization and UNAIDS have released a concrete plan to provide antiretroviral treatment to three million people living with AIDS in developing countries and countries in transition by the end of 2005 - a similar course of action is being pursued by a number of Governments. Progress has also been made in respect to the development and availability of generic drugs and some pharmaceutical companies have agreed to lower the price of HIV/AIDS treatment in developing countries. This is welcome news. The challenge now is to ensure that these drugs reach the people who need them most.

There is yet much to be done. For further progress, we should learn from the successes in those countries which have managed to stem the tide of the HIV/AIDS onslaught. We can strive to improve the dissemination of critical knowledge in the areas of preventive measures, early warning signs, care treatment and training of health care workers. We can mobilise resources to accelerate scientific research on treatment and prevention and we can assist in building capacity, particularly in developing countries, to enable them develop HIV/AIDS prevention strategies that are culturally sensitive.

Civil society is a powerful force in the fight against HIV/AIDS. We should therefore strengthen partnerships with civil society to make our work in behalf of people living with HIV/AIDS more effective. Also, we must persuade governments to contribute to the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and Malaria.

The reality is, however, that whatever progress we have made is simply not enough. We cannot use "otherness" as an excuse for doing nothing - we cannot stigmatize, we cannot discriminate. We constantly need to remind ourselves that each and every one of us is vulnerable in one way or another to this deadly disease. Likewise, we all have a role to play in preventing and halting this disease. We can ill afford strategies that are reactive - they must be proactive. Hopefully science will one day give to us the vaccine we need to counter this global pandemic. My hope is that it will be sooner, rather than later - the lives and health of the peoples of the world depend on it.