

8 March 2004

**Statement of H.E. Mr. Julian Robert Hunte,  
President of the 58th Session of the General Assembly,  
to Mark the Observance of International Women's Day**

We have good cause, on this International Women Day, to celebrate together all that has been achieved nationally, regionally and internationally for gender equality. Many of our accomplishments have been impressive, including the seminal Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, now having 175 states parties. We can also point to legislative and socio-economic gains made in respect of the rights of women and girls.

We would have expected the enjoyment of women's rights and gender equality to be fully respected by the twenty-first century. However, our efforts to remove the barriers to the socio-economic and political issues women face continue, conscious as we are of the challenges and vulnerabilities to which they are exposed as a result.

The theme of International Women's Day, Women and HIV/AIDS, underscores the growing impact that this deadliest of pandemic poses to women and girls. Considered to be only marginally at risk at the outset of the pandemic when the virus seemed to be confined to men, half of those living with HIV/AIDS are now women and girls. In Sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that 58 per cent of those living with HIV are women, and young women ages 15 to 24 are more than twice as likely to be infected as young men.

It is a regrettable fact that gender roles and relations significantly impact risk and vulnerability to HIV infection, insofar as gender determines roles and responsibilities in society, determines power, decision-making, access to and control over assets and personal welfare in general. We cannot, therefore, effectively respond to the pandemic unless we address the gender dimensions of HIV/AIDS.

Too often in families, health care resources are allocated firstly to men and boys and later, or not at all, to women and girls. Too often women infected by HIV/AIDS continue to prioritise the care of others, many seeking treatment, care or support for themselves when it is too late. Too often lack of access to information, education or health care services increase the risk that women will be infected by HIV, and ill equips them to respond to the consequences of HIV infection.

Strategies against HIV/AIDS must therefore ensure the equal access of women to their full rights as citizens. In particular, women must have equal status under the law, must be educated, must be the beneficiary of poverty reduction strategies, and must be protected from all forms of violence. Importantly, HIV/AIDS strategies must ensure women equal access to prevention, treatment and care services and must address the stigma and discrimination associated with the disease. I firmly

believe that nowhere is equality more desperately needed as in the effort to protect women from HIV/AIDS.

The international community, including UNAIDS and the World Health Organization, is doing its part. Initiatives such as the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS launched by UNAIDS should contribute much to mitigating the impact of AIDS on women and girls. WHO's initiative to have three million people on antiretroviral therapy by 2005 should improve the quality of life of millions suffering from HIV/AIDS. And we are all cognizant that the global community, at the highest level made, and must keep, the commitment to combat HIV/AIDS in the Millennium Declaration.

Each and every one of us, men and women, girls and boys, have a role to play in halting and reversing this deadly pandemic. Men and boys must be committed to changing traditional attitudes where these perpetuate gender inequality. Whether as fathers and brothers, legislators, corporate executives, community leaders, youth leaders, professionals or members of civil society organisations, men need a clear understanding about how gender roles impact HIV/AIDS, the devastation the disease is causing in their societies and communities, and what they must do to address it.

The theme of International Women's Day urges us to focus, particularly for a day, on women and HIV/AIDS. This is our starting point. But if we are to save millions around the world, men and women, we must observe not just today, but each day, every day, as AIDS awareness day.