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UNAMSIL COMMEMORATES WORLD AIDS DAY

Freetown - The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), in collaboration with other UN Agencies in the country, yesterday commemorated the World AIDS Day at its headquarters in Freetown through a series of activities.

The day's events kicked off with a statement by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, which was read by his Acting Special Representative in Sierra Leone, Mr. Behrooz Sadry. In the statement, Mr. Annan said that HIV had created "a terrible burden for millions of individuals, families and communities around the world." He said that whereas the virus itself had been devastating, equally detrimental could be the stigma attached to it in some parts of the world. "The solitude and lack of support it imposes are deeply wounding to those who suffer it."

On this year's campaign slogan "Live and Let Live", Mr. Annan called on all to relieve "the burden of HIV-related stigma" and appealed to communities and even family members that have HIV/AIDS patients, otherwise he went on, "The fear of stigma leads to silence, and when it comes to fighting AIDS, silence is death. It suppresses public discussion about AIDS, and deters people from finding out whether they are infected."

Secretary-General Annan however sounded optimistic, saying that the walls of silence about the virus were "weakening." This, he observed, was evidenced by the fact that world leaders were now speaking out "at the highest level."

Representatives from UN Agencies in Sierra Leone spoke on their contribution to the fight against HIV/AIDS in the country. These included the provision of technical assistance for the Government of Sierra Leone, the setting-up of an HIV referral hospital in the country, HIV/AIDS prevention strategy in the Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces and the Sierra Leone Police in more ways than just distributing condoms to military personnel and general sensitization.

According to the representative of UNICEF, with 6.1% prevalence of the disease in Freetown and over 5% prevalence in the countryside, if something is not done now, the country could be faced with a "big epidemic". He called for a "behavioral change" among the public and entreated religious groups to "speak with one voice" on HIV/AIDS.

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Somewhat emotionally, an adolescent boy orphaned of both parents by AIDS spoke out, as did a young man who said he had been living with the virus for seven years and that he first had to go into hiding following ostracism and stigmatization after he went public about his infection. He said that with prospects of defeating stigmatization now becoming brighter, more and more HIV/AIDS patients would come forward to intensify the campaign against the deadly disease; something he said was “the best way to defeat the virus”.

Earlier, UNAMSIL’s Focal Point on HIV/AIDS, Ms. Hirut Befecadu, said Sierra Leone was on the verge of reaching the threshold of being in danger of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. She said UNAMSIL was involved in a lot of activities including raising awareness among peacekeepers and Sierra Leoneans on the dangers of the disease.

The marking of the day was climaxed by candlelight as each member present lit a candle as a mark of mourning for those killed by AIDS. A drama performance on HIV/AIDS by nurses of the Blue Shield Nursing School also formed part of the observance.