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GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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High Level Meeting and comprehensive review of the progress achieved in realizing the targets set out in the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS

Statement by Annmaree O'Keeffe Australia's Ambassador for HIV/AIDS

(Check against delivery)

The High Level Meeting is a critical opportunity to reinvigorate the global response to HIV/AIDS. As many speakers have already noted today, this devastating epidemic has now claimed more than 25 million lives and more than 40 million people are currently living with HIV. Ninety-five per cent of these people live in developing countries. In the Asia Pacific region, HIV/AIDS is spreading rapidly and by 2010, without vigorous and effective prevention responses, this region could become the new epicentre of the epidemic.

We must all stand up to this challenge and take action to re-energise our responses.

Australia is taking a lead role in the Asia Pacific regional response to HIV/AIDS. We have made an unprecedented commitment to work alongside our regional partners to prevent the spread of HIV and provide treatment and care for those living with HIV/AIDS.

Our own experience in having developed a largely successful HIV response has enabled us to share the lessons we have learned with our neighbours in the region. The foundation of Australia's success has been the close collaboration with, and partnership between, affected communities, people living with HIV/AIDS, all levels of government, and the health and research sector as well as through the adoption of innovative education and prevention initiatives. Key to all of this is the leadership demonstrated by people in all of these sectors of society. We have worked hard to foster leadership and partnership in our national response, and this has paid off.

Our work in the region now encompasses many different levels of leadership. The Asia Pacific Leadership Forum on HIV/AIDS and Development is an initiative we developed

and we are proud that the leadership forum is assisting the regional response. We must not underestimate the challenges faced by small nations to address a complex problem like HIV/AIDS. Small island states such as those in the Pacific are constrained in their opportunity and ability to scale up comprehensive responses. Australia works hand in hand with its Pacific neighbours to assist them to develop their capacity and commitment to respond to HIV/AIDS and to build leadership in our region.

We also continue to develop our partnership with the private sector. The Asia Pacific Business Coalition on HIV/AIDS is an example of the strong bond between the public and private sectors. It demonstrates our determination to ensure that all sectors of society mount an effective response to HIV/AIDS. Indeed, there is no other way to address this problem – we must involve everyone in our community. Most of all, we believe it is critical that people living with HIV/AIDS are involved in our response at all levels.

Australia is extremely concerned about the feminisation of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The world cannot continue to allow widespread violence against women and girls, their lack of access to services, and prevailing social and economic inequities to continue. Australia cannot stress enough the importance of making sure that HIV responses tackle the social, cultural and economic factors that make women and girls vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.

While it is very important that we focus on ensuring that antiretroviral treatment is accessible to all those who need it, we must not forget about those people who are not infected with HIV, but are at risk of infection. We must commit to scaling up our prevention efforts to ensure that these people remain free of HIV. This commitment to prevention is a key focus of both Australia's national and international HIV/AIDS strategies. Although Australia has a relatively stable epidemic, there is no room for complacency. We have seen some small rises in HIV infections recently – as have several other developed countries with comparable epidemics. This demonstrates the vital importance of continuing strong prevention approaches – even as access to treatment is being scaled up.

One of the most dramatic factors contributing to Australia's success in HIV prevention has been the implementation of harm reduction approaches. This has assisted us in keeping HIV rates low amongst injecting drug users. We work closely with others in our region to assist them to do the same.

An essential part of the global HIV response is monitoring and evaluation. Within our national strategies and plans, we need to set ambitious goals and measure our progress against them. We must continue to collect data and carry out surveillance to ensure that we can adapt our programs to address this complex and changing epidemic. We have to be able to identify emerging trends in order to ensure that our response is effective. Further to this, it is important that we continue to support UNAIDS in its role as it works with developing countries, assisting them to scale up their responses and coordinating national partners in the provision of technical assistance.

Mr President, Australia has shown leadership and commitment in responding to HIV/AIDS, particularly in the Asia Pacific region. It is critical that every country does the same, if we are to achieve the goal of ending the global HIV/AIDS crisis.