



SRI LANKA

ADDRESS

by

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Mr. President,
Excellencies,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Distinguished Delegates from Member Countries,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel extremely pleased and privileged to stand before this august forum, bringing warm and friendly greetings from His Excellency Mahinda Rajapakse, the President and the people of Sri Lanka.

HIV certainly is becoming a kind of "Weapon of Mass Destruction", a dreadful phenomena that destroys human beings like in the wars waged on the face of earth. It is an invisible enemy of humankind, that respects no borders and devastate economies of some countries worse than in famines or national disasters.

We know that the marvels of medicine have been able to overcome many diseases. Often dedicated health personnel alone have been able to bring about these remarkable successes. But we now know that in order to overcome HIV, a pure biomedical model alone will neither be sufficient, nor even relevant. I believe that even the imparting of knowledge through awareness programs alone would not bring about this change. We need to employ a wider, holistic approach, that eliminates stigma, introduces sustainable behavioural change. For this purpose, we need to bring forth coordinated multi-sectoral action, to supplement the biomedical efforts. This calls for high level political leadership and I have no doubt that the UN has organized this high level consultation with this objective in mind.

We are gathered here today, as leaders of our countries to find ways and means to mitigate the effects of HIV, to fight its existence and find effective ways to reverse the 'mass destruction' being brought about by HIV. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us leaders, to give leadership, guidance, the resources and most of all, a true commitment to achieve this goal.

The reason why we need to concentrate on preventing and controlling the spread of HIV and mitigating its consequences is not merely because it is a disease. HIV can bring economic devastation and destroy the entire social fabric. President Clinton recognizing the uphill battle against HIV, has said (I quote), " we cannot lose our war against AIDS and win our battle against poverty, promote stability, advance democracy, and increase peace and prosperity." He recognized that the rich and the poor countries will be uniformly affected by the epidemic, that there will not be winners and losers, and urged for much greater support from the rich to the needy countries. These leadership efforts did result in larger resources being mobilized to the HIV programs, but we know that this has not been enough. Therefore, in this regard, we will need further behavioural change amongst the rich nations.

Sri Lanka has a literate population and our societies have been blessed by a historic Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions and culture, more recently strengthened by the influence of Islamic and Christian values. This basis of good education and traditional values and ethos of our people have helped enormously to prevent the rapid spread of HIV in Sri Lanka.

Although Sri Lanka records a very low prevalence of HIV, the climate and the environment conducive to its rapid spread already exist in the country. 1.5 million of its population working overseas, increasing age at marriage, still visible stigma and discrimination, eroding social and cultural values within certain sections accelerated by globalization, and the lack of sufficient awareness on safe sex, are factors that can easily tip the balance.

Secretary-General Mr. Kofi Annan once remarked, and I quote "the first condition for success is leadership at every level". Political leadership is even more crucial to achieve the envisaged results. National responses simply cannot wait for the HIV cases to soar, nor can we deny its existence.

I am pleased to state that Sri Lanka, having taken to heart the lessons from the experiences of other Regions, was able to provide political leadership at the highest level to confront HIV. Successive governments and leaders have shown their unwavering commitment by going public and speaking about HIV. The newly-elected President, H.E. Mahinda Rajapakse has given highest priority for this purpose. We have a vibrant program for increasing the awareness of the political leadership at all levels, covering 85% of the Central, Provincial and Local Government political leadership. In addition, we have mobilized the civil society fully in these efforts. Currently over 45 Non-Government Organizations are working actively with the National Aids Control Program.

Sri Lanka has always considered free healthcare as an investment and therefore has extended anti-retrovirals free of charge to all the needy persons. I must thank the World Bank, UNFPA, WHO, UNAIDS and the other multilateral and bilateral organizations for their generous technical and financial support.

Taking the Sri Lankan experience into reckoning, I can emphasize that HIV programs should target mainly the women and adolescents and the whole gamut of preventive and care activities should be an integral part of the wider Reproductive Health Program.

Distinguished delegates, as a tangible expression of our commitment, though being a low prevalent country with no public health burden of HIV as yet, Sri Lanka will be hosting the 8th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and Pacific (8th ICAAP), in August 2007. The theme of this significant event - "Waves of Change - Waves of Hope", we believe, is very apt for our cause. I extend a sincere invitation to each and every one of you to attend this Congress next year.

Distinguished delegates, the person who provided an example at the highest level of political leadership in recent times is none other than

Mr. Nelson Mandela, who was fearless and forthright in his advocacy and brought so much charisma to the fight against HIV. I can only end by reminding ourselves of his words, "we know what to do and how much it will cost. We now need the leadership, vision and political courage to move away from rhetoric to practical action". Let us strive to live up to its true meaning.

Thank you very much for your attention.