

Statement by General Assembly President Jan Eliasson  
at opening of United Nations High-Level Meeting  
on HIV/AIDS

31 May 2006

Secretary-General, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates

Today's meeting of the General Assembly is no ordinary meeting. Over the next three days, the world will be watching us almost as never before. All 191 Member States will be taking a long, hard look at our collective response to AIDS since the landmark 2001 Declaration of Commitment adopted by a Special Session of this General Assembly.

All of us will be deciding what new commitments we need to make to ensure that 2006 goes down in history as the moment when the world set about turning the tide of this pandemic once and for all. Even as we begin our meetings, negotiations continue on the draft Political Declaration, under the very able co-chairmanship of Ambassador Laxana of Thailand and Ambassador Hackett of Barbados. I call upon you all to show maximum co-operation and flexibility as these negotiations progress.

There is worldwide interest in what we do here in this Assembly because HIV/AIDS is a truly worldwide problem and because it demands a worldwide response. It affects every part of the world, and every part of society. It affects young and old, rich and poor, male and female, and those of all lifestyles, and of all cultures.

And just as AIDS affects us all, the responsibility to fight it is one we all share. Though Governments must play a central role in the response, we alone cannot tackle this global emergency. Nor can the UN. We need individuals on the ground. We need communities.

We need civil society in all its forms. We need business and trade unions. We need scientists. We need the media. We need local government. We need Parliamentarians. We need our regional and multilateral institutions. And above all we need people living with HIV, and those at greatest risk of infection, to be at the centre of the response.

That is why it is so important that so many of our colleagues from civil society are with us for these three days. This Assembly has specially accredited around 800 organizations to attend this meeting, and they are joined by many others with standing ECOSOC accreditation. I know that some who were due to be here have had their plans frustrated. I share their frustration. But nonetheless I believe our deliberations this week will be greatly enriched by the unprecedented number of civil society representatives who are here. They will truly help to bring the realities of the world into our halls.

I mentioned the importance of putting people living with HIV at the centre of the response. This General Assembly will shortly take an important symbolic step towards this goal when we invite Khensani Mavasa from South Africa to address us as a representative of civil society. Ms. Mavasa is a young woman living with HIV. The face of this pandemic is increasingly young, poor and female. Worldwide, twice as many young women are living with HIV as young men. In sub-Saharan Africa, infected young women outnumber young men by three to one.

The world is doing far too little to help these young women help themselves. Only one in five young women know how to prevent HIV transmission. And less than one in ten HIV-positive pregnant women are receiving antiretrovirals. I very much hope that the feminization of the epidemic will be a major element of our deliberations this week, and that we will take decisions which will have a tangible impact on young women's lives.

The Secretary-General will soon tell us more about the conclusions of his report assessing progress since the 2001 Declaration of Commitment. But suffice it to say that while the global response to the pandemic has gathered strength on many fronts, in terms of leadership, funding and co-ordination, it is still far from good enough. Twenty five years into this pandemic, we have not controlled it. Even now, half of all new HIV infections are in young people aged between 15 and 24.

I therefore call on you all to work together as partners for the most concrete and powerful outcome possible from these three days of meetings and discussions. We need a response commensurate to the threat we face. We know what needs to be done, and we have the tools to do it. Success in the fight against AIDS is not a lofty vision; in some places it is on the way to becoming a reality. In a few countries, infection rates have begun to fall. Lives are being saved through expanded access to HIV treatment and prevention.

But still, there are nearly six million people in our world who are living with HIV and need treatment today but have no access to it. And four out of five people who are at risk of HIV infection have no access to any form of prevention.

Five years ago, we made important promises to all the world's people - children and adolescents, women and men. This week, we must make the necessary commitments to strengthen and deliver the response we promised.