

1 December 2006

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,
on World AIDS Day**

We live in a world in which 1 in 5 of our fellow human beings live on less than US\$1 a day; a world in which 1.2 billion people won't have any clean water to drink today; a world in which 113 million children won't attend school today.

Our world will never be secure unless we tackle poverty, injustice and inequality. And HIV/AIDS creates all three. It is a growing problem that killed 3 million people this year. Every human life lost is a tragedy. Defeating HIV/AIDS would indeed improve the condition of all mankind.

HIV/AIDS affects not only the individual but the entire community. As more and more teachers die from HIV/AIDS, children are robbed of an education. Farmers dying of HIV/AIDS are unable to provide enough food for their families and communities. It is devastating economies in the developing world widening the gap between the world's richest and poorest countries.

In Sub-Saharan Africa the spread of HIV is most severe. So as some parts of the world progress, life expectancy in this region is only 46 years because of the ravages of HIV/AIDS. The region accounts for 62% of global infections, 65% of new infections and 72% of total deaths. It is a tragedy that this region accounts for nine out of ten children living with the disease because HIV infections are up to six times higher for young women than for young men. As a result, nearly 1000 innocent children die in each day, everyday in Africa.

It is sad to note that some still find it difficult or embarrassing to talk about HIV. As we try to get treatments to people, we learn that many are simply too frightened of HIV to get tested. Some women would rather not get the treatment they need - to save their lives, or stop their children from getting HIV - than cope with the fear and stigma of HIV.

The UN stands ready to act on behalf of more than 17 million women living with HIV/AIDS worldwide, and the additional 225 young women between 15 and 24 who will become infected every hour today.

If we are to beat AIDS we must indeed act, and the time to act is now. In 2005, donors agreed to support free basic healthcare, universal access to AIDS treatment, and primary education for all. Developing countries agreed to develop national plans to defeat the spread of the disease. The challenge for all of us is to make good on our commitments and work in closer partnership towards our common goal. Civil society, NGOs, the media, private sector and faith groups have

an important role in promoting public awareness and holding leaders to account for their promises.

There are some very practical things we can all do to make a difference. We need to establish healthy behavior when our children are young rather than ask them to change later - to have safe intercourse, to be able to plan for their families. We know that gender and power relations put pressure on young people to marry young, to opt out of education, or to have intercourse.

Young people also face barriers to access services provided by governments or they cannot afford them and fear being judged when they go to a clinic. This severely limits access to contraception and leads to the high rates of unintended pregnancy and HIV in young people. Almost 140 million women do not have access to contraception - so they have no choice in deciding if and when to have children. If world leaders honor their commitments and live up to their promises, then young people would have the reproductive health services and information to meet their needs.

To halt the spread of HIV/AIDS we need a culture change in health service provision and equitable relations between the sexes. We need a comprehensive approach to tackle HIV/AIDS because there is no single intervention that will influence the behavior of young people or improve their sexual health. First and foremost, young people need a good education; when our children are in school they are much less likely to be infected by HIV than those who opt out or have no choice. Yet over 100 million are not in school right now.

The youth are the future, they will shape the future - we are all accountable to act now to protect their health and wellbeing.