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THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE PLENARY SEGMENT
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY HIGH-LEVEL MEETING ON AIDS
New York, 31 May 2006**

Thank you, Mr. President.

Let me begin by adding my voice to the tributes paid to Dr. Lee Jong-Wook, who as leader of the World Health Organization gave so much to our fight against HIV/AIDS and our struggle for global health worldwide. His death is a profound blow to us all.

Excellencies and friends,

It is 25 years ago next week that the world first heard of HIV/AIDS. Looking back, that age of innocence -- if I may put it that way -- seems to belong not only in a different time, but in a different world.

Since then, HIV/AIDS has unfolded along a pattern we tend to see only in nightmares. It has spread further, faster and with more catastrophic long-term effects than any other disease. Its impact has become a devastating obstacle to the progress of humankind. In 25 short years, HIV/AIDS has gone from local obscurity to global emergency.

It took the world far too long to wake up. Denial dogged the response to AIDS. Millions paid with their lives.

But in recent years, that has changed. The response has gained genuine momentum. The real turning point came when this Assembly held its Special Session on HIV/AIDS five years ago. I said at the opening of that gathering that I hoped it would be a truly special session. That hope was borne out.

The Session moved the world's response to a different level. With the Declaration of Commitment, Member States adopted a number of specific, time-bound targets for fighting the epidemic.

Excellencies,

My Report to this Assembly provides a comprehensive update on progress achieved since then. Let me single out a few points for special attention.

A significant number of countries have managed to reach key objectives. More than 70 have quadrupled access to HIV testing and counselling services. More than 20 have reached the goal of the “3 by 5” initiative -- providing antiretroviral treatment to at least half of those in need. The global financing target has been met. And the Global Fund that I called for is now fully operational.

Yet the vast majority of countries have fallen distressingly short of meeting the targets in the Declaration. These shortcomings are deadly. For example, most countries have still not ensured that young people have an accurate understanding of HIV and how it can infect them.

And the world has been unconscionably slow in meeting one of the most vital aspects of the struggle: measures to fight the spread of AIDS among women and girls. In the Declaration, countries pledged to adopt national strategies to promote women's rights, protect women and girls from all forms of discrimination, and empower them to protect themselves against HIV.

Yet today, infections among women are increasing in every part of the world -- particularly among young women. Globally, more than twice as many young women are infected as young men.

Excellencies,

These are areas where we must apply the main lesson of the past 25 years: it is only when we work together with determination and unity of purpose that we can win against this disease. That requires visionary leadership, from all of you. And it requires unprecedented partnership, among Governments, the private sector and civil society.

That is why it is crucial that we have civil society fully engaged in this high-level meeting. I am heartened that in a few moments, Khensani Mavasa of South Africa will become the first person living with HIV to address the General Assembly.

Friends,

This meeting must chart the way forward. It must set us firmly on course towards getting us as close as possible to universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010 -- the goal that you committed yourselves to at the World Summit last September. It must move us decisively towards our destination -- the Millennium Development Goal of halting, and beginning to reverse the spread of HIV and AIDS among women, men and children by 2015.

I count on the personal leadership of each one of you to get us there. Nothing less than the future of the world is at stake.

Thank you very much.