

# Special Report on the opening of the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City 4 August 2008

4 August 2008 – Addressing the world’s largest forum on HIV/AIDS, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has urged bolstered efforts to tackle the pandemic, stressing how the virus impedes development. “Most countries still have a long way to go to meet the goal” set two years ago at the General Assembly to move towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support by 2010, Mr. Ban said last night at the opening of the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City. These nations will thus have difficulty in reaching the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of curbing and reversing the spread of AIDS by the target date of 2015, he noted. The Secretary-General stressed that greater resources are needed to combat the scourge in the coming decades as greater numbers of people receive treatment and live longer. He welcomed the recent legislation passed in the United States earmarking \$48 billion to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria over the next five years, and praised the commitment of the Group of Eight (G-8) industrialized nations to provide universal access to HIV prevention and treatment by 2010. “Just as important, in most countries, stigma against people living with HIV remains a grave challenge,” Mr. Ban told the Conference. One third of countries lack laws to protect those living with HIV, and in many places, discrimination against women, men, who have sex with men, sex workers, drug users and ethnic minorities is still legal. “This must change,” he said, calling for an end to discrimination against people living HIV and members of vulnerable groups. Since taking up the post in January 2007, the Secretary-General said that some of his most moving and inspiring experiences have been meeting with colleagues and others living with the virus. “They are wonderfully courageous and motivated people, and should serve as an example to us all on how to act with dignity in the face of adversity,” he said. “That they should be discriminated against, including through restrictions on their ability to travel between countries, should fill us with shame.” In those nations with legal protections in place, Mr. Ban pointed out that those living with HIV have greater access to services, resulting in fewer infections, less demand for anti-retroviral treatment and fewer deaths. While at the Conference, he is expected to meet with world leaders, people living with HIV and community groups. During his three-day visit to Mexico that kicked off on Sunday, he will hold talks with Mexican President Felipe Calderón and with Foreign Secretary Patricia Espinosa Cantellano. Mr. Ban also plans to address a joint session of the Mexican Senate and Chamber of Deputies, as well as confer with authorities on climate change and meet with business leaders through the UN Global Compact’s Mexico network.



Mexican virologist Dr. Luis Soto Ramirez, co-chair of the 17th International AIDS Conference, which opens Sunday in the Mexican capital, says that ramping up prevention efforts is the most urgent step to be taken in the fight against HIV/AIDS. While rushing from one commitment to another in the run-up to the event, also known as AIDS 2008, which will draw 25,000 participants from 188 countries, Soto Ramirez takes time to question the way the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reported the conclusions of its latest global report on Tuesday. According to UNAIDS, the annual number of new HIV infections dropped from three million in 2001 to 2.7 million in 2007.

At this year’s International AIDS Conference begins in Mexico City, All Africa guest columnist George Katiti says African governments and civil society will need to assert themselves more vigorously if the goal of an Aids-free generation is to be realised. The global community is uniquely positioned to make dramatic gains in tackling HIV/AIDS in Africa. As former United States President Bill Clinton has said, if we act, work hard and do it together, it might even be possible to achieve a generation free of AIDS.

Karen Dunaway was 5 year old when her parents used drawing to explain to her that they both had the HIV virus - and so did she. Now the 12-year-old is one of the most prominent AIDS activists in Latin America and a rarity in a region where few children are willing to break the silence and tell their classmates they have HIV for fear of rejection. She edits a children’s magazine on the virus. “The boys and girls who live with HIV are here and we are growing up with many goals,” Keren said Sunday at the opening of an international AIDS conference where she shared the stage with Mexican President Felipe Calderon and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Worldwide, people ages 15-24 accounted for 45 percent of people infected with HIV in 2007, according to the 2008 UN AIDS report.

In Latin America, 55,000 of the nearly 2 million people with the virus were under 15 years old, the vast majority of them infected by their mothers. Only 36 percent of pregnant women in the region receive medicine to prevent transmission, although that is an increase of 26 percent since 2004.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Chinese organizing committee for the Games. "Olympic athletes are helping break down barriers of stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV," Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director, said today at the launch of the campaign in the Chinese capital. "They are also well placed to carry the messages across countries and cultures to inspire people to adopt behaviours that protect them against HIV," Dr. Piot added. In the clinic at the Olympic Village, some 100,000 high quality condoms are available for distribution along with information on HIV prevention and anti-discrimination in English, French and Chinese. In addition, all Olympians have received a fact sheet and two AIDS video spots featuring the Chinese basketball star Yao Ming and Michael Ballack, the German footballer and UNAIDS Special Representative. The campaign aims at reaching Olympic athletes, members of the national delegations and the more than 100,000 volunteers supporting the games, using the event to amplify key HIV and AIDS messages globally.

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