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**STATEMENT OF SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU AT
1999 WORLD AIDS CAMPAIGN FOR THE INTERNATIONAL
COMMUNITY - CONGO HALL
ADDIS ABABA -9TH DECEMBER 199**

**Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen**

I wish to welcome you all to the Headquarters of our Continental Organization, and particularly to the Congo Hall. Your positive response to the invitation for participating in today's event, not only accords the organizers of this event deserving encouragement and support, but it also underscores your concern about the AIDS pandemic and your commitment to seeking a collective approach in confronting it.

Unlike in other occasions when we congregate to celebrate a delightful event or to honour a distinguished achievement, in this particular occasion we are meeting to rededicate our determination in combating a dreadful disease. Allow me to congratulate the organizers, including the teachers and students of the various schools, who have been actively involved throughout this week in preparing for this event. For those of us who have seen them doing their rehearsals, the zeal and enthusiasm they demonstrated was an optimistic indication of their readiness to take up the challenge of confronting this tragedy.

**Excellencies
Ladies and Gentlemen**

During the past ten years, AIDS has been the single, most indiscriminate and devastating killer of the largest number of African people. It has killed more people than those who have died from the total number of conflicts in the Continent during the past two decades. By afflicting most severely the age group of 15 to 24 years old, the pandemic affects the most productive segment of the population thus also undermining the future of our Continent. The disease has created more orphans who have been traumatized after the ordeal of living with parents suffering from AIDS, and even more seriously, it is now having its heaviest toll on women and girls, who are the cradle of human survival. AIDS is thus a serious disaster for Africa, which calls for urgent and concerted action.

Whereas since its detection in the 1980s, the disease has spread rapidly to all parts of the world, Africa now has the highest number of infections, patients and, more tragically, death victims. The social and economic impact of the pandemic is devastating, and the human and psychological effect catastrophic. Indeed, as the numbers show, many people are now infected with the virus and the disease, but it is equally true that almost each one of us, almost every African family, and almost every community in the continent has been affected in one or way or the other. The consequences to our economies in terms of budgetary expenditure as well as lost revenues are enormous.

I believe that during the past 9 days a number of sad statistics have been provided, which emphasize the multi-faceted dimensions of this tragedy and the seriousness of its reality. Indeed, it is important to underscore this reality so that each one of us, and particularly the youths of Africa, can be aware of the prevailing predicament so that they can rise up to the occasion and make their contribution towards containing its spread and ultimate eradication.

The theme of this year's campaign is ***Listen, Live, and Learn***, all of which being messages that underscore proactive action and a positive engagement in dealing with the disease. And very appropriately, the campaign focuses on children and young people. It is in this regard that I wish to reiterate four main aspects related with the campaign theme and which are also connected with strategic action in the context of our Continent.

The AIDS pandemic has been frequently referred to as the 'silent killer', due to the fact that in some of our communities we have refused to talk about it or even to deny and distance ourselves from it. The consequences have been horrendous. It is now being increasingly acknowledged that we need to be more open about this disease and increase sensitization and awareness about its causes, its manifestations, the way it is spread and how to reduce chances of infection. It is important to encourage openness and dialogue between adults and youths, and among youths themselves. When exposed to proper sensitization the young people are likely to listen, learn and practice safe behaviour.

The second aspect I would like to reiterate is that up to now, no effective cure has been found for AIDS. The only remedy in containing the disease is prevention through behaviour change. It is only by advocating the avoidance to all types of behaviour that lead to infection, that the incidence of AIDS has been successfully lowered. In this connection, I wish to pay tribute to the Government of Uganda for significantly succeeding to reduce the infection rates among the general population, and more specifically among the youths, through behaviour change. Fortunately, this is one area in which each of us, and particularly among the youths, is capable of emulating.

The third aspect that needs to be emphasized is the necessity to increase compassion towards the victims of this illness. We need to provide the patients with care, love and assistance to the maximum of our abilities. Many of these people are victims of circumstances and we should assist them to live a prolonged life of dignity and meaning. We should strive to de-stigmatize the disease and disassociate any shame about it. We now know more about how it is spread and thus how it can be contained. This is a disease that can affect anyone who does not comply with the needed precautionary measures. AIDS knows no colour, ethnicity, country, region or religion. There is no reason for stigma.

And fourthly, while the search for cure continues, it is important to enhance our collective action in improving health care delivery, including the prevention of transmission from mother to child. Campaigns to encourage pharmaceutical companies to try and reduce prices and to find ways for governments and private sectors to assist, need to be found. Structures for the caring of victims need to be improved at all levels.

As the dawn of the new millennium approaches, it is important that all people join hands in combating this killer disease. Partnership at all levels of society need to be promoted, as this is the key to winning the war against AIDS. We, at the OAU, wish to commit ourselves to supporting all endeavours that are aimed at combating this pandemic. Indeed, the youths of Africa have to take up this historic challenge and assume a leading role in winning the war which by any standards constitutes for us the most awesome challenge facing our continent and our people today.

Once again, I thank you all, and I look forward to the students' presentations.