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Organization of African Unity

**Statement By Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim,  
Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity  
At the Launching of the National AIDS Council  
Addis Ababa, 22 April 2000**

**Your Excellency, Dr. Negasso Gidada, President of the  
Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia**

**Distinguished Ministers**

**Excellencies**

**Ladies and Gentlemen**

I would like to express my appreciation for being invited to participate at this official launching of the National AIDS Council. In my view, this occasion is not only a launching ceremony of an institution, but it represents a closing of the ranks to confront one of the foremost challenges of our time.

The presence of His Excellency Dr. Negasso Gidada here today is a further testimony to the seriousness in which the issue of the HIV-AIDS pandemic is taken by the Government of the Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and its commitment to deploy every effort in combating the scourge. The personal involvement of the President and the active role of his office in launching this Council are an indication of the progress that has been made in this country in recognizing that the fight against HIV-AIDS needs to be a priority agenda and that it receives attention at the highest level of leadership.

I would like to take this opportunity to underscore the gravity and seriousness of this very grave pandemic, and the importance of undertaking concerted and coordinated action at the individual, community, national, regional and continental levels.

After living with the agony and misery of this disease for nearly twenty years in our Continent, and finding ourselves in a situation where many are infected and almost everyone affected, it may appear that there is no need to remind ourselves of the gruesome realities created by the disease. Unfortunately the pandemic has penetrated so deeply into our societies and it has become so pervasive to our daily existence as African peoples, that it is no longer possible to avoid recounting its brutal effects.

In terms of deaths, agonizing deaths, this disease has killed more people than those whom we have lost in all the wars that have been fought in the Continent during the past twenty years. And even more devastating, there is no distant place to escape as a refuge or a nearby land to relocate. This is a terrible disease which physically destroys communities, and damages their very means of survival.

We have now reached a situation whereby our Continent has the highest number of HIV infections, AIDS patients and death victims. The statistics are mind boggling. For example, in Uganda it is reported that about 2 million people have been confirmed dead as a result of HIV-AIDS. Africa's Southern and Eastern Region, with less than 5 percent of the world's population has more than 50 percent of those living with HIV. In fact, 60 percent of AIDS deaths occur in this region. And in some of our societies, villages have been wiped out of their active and productive population. Worse still, by the end of 1999, the pandemic was estimated to have left 11 millions orphans in the world, 90 percent of whom are African children.

Generally, the pandemic has exerted its heaviest toll on youths thus devastating the most prospective members of our societies and threatening the future of our communities and nations. Quite dreadfully, by affecting infants and creating an unimaginable number of helpless orphans, the disease has brought about a cruel tragedy and a serious trauma to our societies. And in all this, no nation, no race, and no social class has been spared.

The African Continent has been exerting so much efforts, and it has taken bold measures to generate sustainable development and to improve the living conditions of the people after a long spell of economic retrogression. Gradually, we are beginning to see signs of positive development. It is therefore a tragic irony that the very people who are expected to sustain this momentum of development, and in the process to reap the accruing benefits are being wiped out by this horrific disease.

During the past two decades when the disease has been ravaging our continent, there have been also positive experiences of containing its spread and coping with its effects. I had earlier mentioned the staggering figure of fatalities in Uganda. Yet, thanks to appropriate intervention measures, Uganda has been one of the success stories in combating this pandemic. It has been able to reduce significantly the infection rate among the general population, and more specifically among the youths. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, AIDS prevalence rate was as high as over 30 percent. It has now been reduced to 10 percent through concerted action. It is within this context that the launching of a National AIDS Council here in Ethiopia derives its particular significance. It adds to the proactive efforts that are being initiated in the Continent in combating the pandemic.

Among the critical lessons that have emerged out of this experience has been the necessity to overcome the denial often associated with the disease. For quite some time, many of our societies had refused to accept that the pandemic is with us. There was a tendency to externalize and demonize it, and when it struck, to give it a different characterization or even to conceal the occurrence. The consequences of such an attitude contributed a lot to the spread of this fatal disease. Proactive action requires acknowledging its existence and avoiding inhibitions in dealing with it. It also requires that we all recognize that despite all the efforts made, for the present, there is no cure for this pandemic.

The only available option that we have at the present is prevention, particularly through behaviour change. Many of the success accounts in containing the pandemic in the continent have come from countries that have taken concerted action in promoting behaviour modes that reduce the spread of the disease and which change the manner of caring for its victims. Educating and sensitizing our people about these realities, is therefore crucial.

Critical in the behaviour change has been the elements of openness and awareness. It is important that we openly address this pandemic from the family level to the Summits of the Heads of State and Government. Only through such an approach can we create the necessary awareness for responding and dealing with it. In this respect, the awareness has to be all encompassing so that the required measures for fostering prevention can be internalized into our every day practices.

I should hasten to add, in this connection, that the concentration of population in urban centres has led to a more rapid spread of the disease in these areas. However, a lack of awareness and the absence of the necessary facilities for prevention and coping with its effects have made the rural population to become even more vulnerable. It is therefore necessary that attention be given to all sectors of society.

The catastrophe meted by the HIV-AIDS pandemic, in terms of the innumerable loss of lives, in terms of incapacitating governments, in terms of eroding achievements that have taken very long to gain, and in terms of undermining the survival of societies has clearly confirmed that this is a major threat to the security and welfare of our people. As a way of confronting this scourge, **Total Mobilization** is required. The whole society has to enter into a combat mode for liberating itself from the scourge.

It is not simply a matter to be left to the health sector or to handful non-governmental organizations. Every actor and every institution in society needs to be involved to combat this dreadful enemy. Every one of us at every level, and using every means at the disposal has to be engaged in containing and ultimately overcoming this disease. Of course, within a context of such total mobilization, the guiding and coordinating role of institutions such as the National AIDS Council become paramount.

Among the factors that have contributed to the worsening situation pertaining to the HIV-AIDS pandemic, has been the stigma often attached to its victims. For a long time our societies have not only characterized the disease negatively but they have also tended to shun away the victims at a very critical point of their lives. Denial of means of survival, including

employment; being blamed and socially ostracized; and in many cases, being deprived of hope for living, have made many victims conceal their predicament. 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.

It is necessary that we should be compassionate 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.

In all these endeavours, continentally, we should strive to learn from each other on how to contain and cope with the disease. We have acquired a lot of experience during the past twenty years that we need to share and disseminate so as to ensure success in our collective efforts. In the same regard, it is important that adequate support is rendered by the international community in combating this pandemic that knows no boundaries. The recent announcement by the major international financial institutions that they will devote more resources for the fight against HIV-AIDS is a positive move that should be welcome. We look forward to the disbursement of these resources that will bolster our local efforts.

Let me conclude by wishing success to the National AIDS Council that is being launched today. While the task it is embarking upon is enormously challenging, it is also a noble and vital one. It deals with nothing less than the very survival of a people. Thus, the Council cannot afford to fail. It should not fail.

The OAU, which considers the HIV-AIDS pandemic as one of the most formidable challenges facing our Continent and our People, will be prepared to work closely with the National AIDS Council of Ethiopia as with all similar and other national institutions in our Member States as well as with sub-regional, regional and international Organizations in our common quest against this killer disease.

I thank you.