

Speech

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‘Facing the Challenge’

Keynote speech to the First Eastern European and Central Asian HIV/AIDS Conference

Moscow, 15th May 2006

**Dr. Peter Piot,
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Minister Zurabov,

Excellencies,

Dear friends,

I warmly congratulate the organizers of the conference – Dr. Gennady Onischenko and his colleagues in the Russian Government, AIDS Info share, and the members of the Conference Organizing Committee – for bringing together such a diverse group of leaders of the AIDS response. This first ever conference on AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia is a great opportunity to really accelerate an exceptional response to AIDS across the region.

Nothing less than an exceptional response will do because AIDS is an unprecedented crisis and poses exceptional challenges. It is indeed one of the make-or-break global threats of this century, in the same league as mass poverty and climate change, not one of many infectious diseases.

2006 is a highly symbolic year in the history of AIDS. Since AIDS was first recognized 25 years ago among 5 gay men in Los Angeles, it has spread so rapidly that today it is the world's leading cause of death among both women and men between ages 15-59. And half of all new infections globally are in young people, with an even higher proportion in this region, which means the threat to future generations is worsening, not lessening.

Even in countries where a relatively small percentage of adults are infected such as here, AIDS magnifies existing health and demographic problems and worsens the load on social services.

In country after country, the reluctance to confront sexual behaviours and drug use has led to massive failure to help keep people from becoming infected with HIV, failure to end discrimination and stigma, and failure to provide HIV treatment.

Friends,

The theme of this conference – 'Facing the Challenge' – is very appropriate because throughout the world, there are now finally clear signs of commitment to fighting AIDS. And we are also starting to see the return on the investments that have been made in recent years.

Let me give you a few examples.

Between 2003 and 2005, the number of people in low and middle income countries receiving antiretroviral therapy more than tripled to close to 1.5 million people, saving about 300,000 lives last year alone- this was possible largely thanks to the increased financial contribution from the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and national budgets.

And on most continents, we see countries and communities where HIV prevalence is declining particularly among young people. This is clearly a strong demonstration that HIV prevention works. Unfortunately, such prevention successes are not yet seen in this region.

However, I see many encouraging signs here. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, we have evidence of growing political and civil society commitment to a strong AIDS response.

Just last month, President Putin convened the Presidium of the State Council of the Russian Federation to examine all aspects of the epidemic in Russia. Saying, and I quote, "the situation is alarming," President Putin emphasized that "our task is to limit the spread of the virus as much as possible."

In Ukraine, President Yushchenko has engaged himself in the response to AIDS. His address on World AIDS Day last year reflects the strength of his concern and commitment. I quote, "...People living with AIDS cannot be lost by society, as they have the right to life with dignity, quality education and health care.... ."

There is also progress on a vital issue for the region: stopping HIV from spreading among injecting drug users. In Kyrgyzstan, efforts are underway to bring harm reduction services to scale, including in prisons. In Kazakhstan and Moldova, methadone substitution programmes are being piloted.

And throughout the region, people living with HIV and civil society organizations are at the forefront of efforts to build a stronger AIDS response. I am delighted that the Eastern European and Central Asia Union of People Living with HIV was launched in September 2005 with assistance from UNAIDS, and is providing support to local organizations of people living with HIV that now exist in almost every country in the region.

Friends,

But, as said before, unfortunately, no country in this region has yet seen a lasting and significant decrease in HIV prevalence or incidence. Instead, the AIDS situation continues to worsen across the region, reaching crisis levels in some countries.

We have now a really alarming situation in some Russian cities, according to the Federal AIDS center, 7%-8% of all young men aged 15-30 years are already infected with HIV.

And the epidemic is rapidly worsening among women across the region, and in turn a growing number of newborns are infected.

The epidemic's death toll is rising sharply too, with over 50,000 adults and children killed in the region in 2005, almost twice the toll of 2003. One reason is that access to antiretroviral treatment continues to fall far short of need, with only about 13% of the people in urgent need of treatment receiving it by the end of 2005.

Friends,

What is the way forward? How do we translate political commitment into meaningful action on the ground? How do we move from being reactive to being strategic? How do we put in place a sustainable long-term response to universal access ?

These are the questions that I hope this conference will address.

I believe that the experience of the past twenty-plus years shows that four essential things are needed in every country to put them ahead of their epidemics.

A first is leadership. No effective response to AIDS is possible without strong leadership commitment, beginning from the most senior levels of politics and government. Without political commitment you can't do anything and we need more in this region.

But a problem that is so rooted in social, interpersonal relationships as AIDS cannot be solved only by governments, or only by doctors, or only by what we call the 'AIDS community.' It requires the active engagement of the broad spectrum of society – not only from government, but also from civil society, labour organizations, private industry, religious groups and the media.

Leadership on AIDS from all walks of society is of critical importance because this epidemic confronts us with issues that most societies are reluctant to address.

Consider drug use. In order to save lives, it is equally essential to ensure people do not use drugs or narcotics as to work with injecting drug users through activities that are scientifically proven to be most effective in minimizing harm for themselves and for others. Therefore we need to urgently implement large-scale substitution therapy, access to clean needles and access to drug rehabilitation – in other words, harm reduction. And we also need to sharply increase access to antiretroviral treatment for the many people dependent on narcotic drugs who are living with HIV.

Similarly, consider AIDS-related stigma and discrimination, which until today remain among the most common and severe barriers to getting ahead of the epidemic. Fear and stigma are truly the best friends of this virus. Only when we have an accepting environment will people come forward to be tested for HIV, will seek treatment and help, and will be able to help others. Without this supportive social environment, there is no way to make progress against AIDS. This is not a matter of money. This is why there is no substitute for leadership from all sections of society in tackling AIDS, and this is why we must all come together in a broad coalition to save lives. In the 25 years of this epidemic, we have been shown time and time again that whenever we are divided, the virus wins; when we are united, we win.

A second essential need is to work towards universal access for all HIV services, spanning HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. The agenda for action for moving towards universal access has emerged from an extensive consultation process in over 100 countries, including widely in this region. It is detailed in the assessment report by UNAIDS that was released just over two weeks ago. And in a few weeks from now, world leaders will convene for a High Level Meeting on AIDS at the UN General Assembly to assess progress in the global AIDS response and I look

to them to provide the personal leadership needed to get close to universal access by 2010.

A third essential need is, of course, money. Though some governments in the region have recently stepped up domestic funding for the AIDS response, it is on the whole still very inadequate. So there is an urgent need to increase domestic funding and to sustain it at high levels. For those countries in this region that cannot afford to significantly increase domestic funding, support from the Global Fund, the World Bank and major bi-lateral donors is of critical importance. It is also therefore imperative that the Global Fund is fully financed.

And the fourth essential need is to make the money work. It is indeed not enough to have money. It must reach the people who need it. And the way forward here is to realize the vision of the Three Ones principles. Every country needs one strong national AIDS authority, with power to engage all sectors, with capacity for action and coordination, and with engagement of people living with HIV and civil society. I emphasize that people living with HIV and the groups most at risk have to be fully engaged if there are to be real results on the ground. Too often, though, they lack the resources to participate effectively in developing and implementing strategies to tackle AIDS. A strong national AIDS effort will ensure that networks of people living with HIV have sufficient capacity to play their rightful role in helping guide the response to the epidemic.

Friends,

This is a challenging agenda of action but AIDS is truly an unprecedented crisis that demands nothing less of us than an exceptional response. And there are no shortcuts or quick fixes. Every element of this response, from leadership to comprehensive on-the-ground programmes, will need to be sustained over many years, decades, because this epidemic will not end of its own in the foreseeable future.

But I am confident that each of the countries of this region can and will mount an exceptional response to AIDS. This is possible because of the leadership commitment and financing that has been mobilized recently, combined with the existing high levels of education and human resource capacity. So in this region we now have a historic chance to achieve real results on the ground, to succeed in every aspect of HIV prevention and to deliver HIV treatment and care to all those in need. We can safeguard the future of our countries and communities against AIDS.

You have my personal commitment that the entire UN family, united through UNAIDS, will do their utmost to support you in every way. Today, in this era of large-scale implementation, the UNAIDS Secretariat and the 10 cosponsoring agencies are combining our longstanding efforts to make the money work for people on the ground, through helping communities and governments scale up towards universal access.

Friends,

Having come so far, we cannot fail now. In this region and globally, we can and must lay the foundation for ultimately ending the epidemic. We must face the challenges and succeed.

I wish you a truly productive conference.

Thank you very much.