AIDS: facing up to the global threat

by Nelson Mandela, President of South Africa

Monday 3 February 1997

Mr Chairperson;
Distinguished delegates and guests;
Ladies and gentlemen,

I feel greatly honoured to be invited to address you today on a matter that so deeply affects the whole world.

Although HIV/AIDS has been with us through the 1980’s and 90’s, it is a problem whose solution continues to elude us. We have made progress in understanding the epidemic. But we are still unable to contain its spread.

The AIDS pandemic is getting worse at a rate that makes a collective global effort imperative.

When the history of our time is written, it will record the collective efforts of societies responding to a threat that has put in the balance the future of whole nations.

Future generations will judge us on the adequacy of our response.

In many ways South Africa’s past - as that of most colonial societies - remains with us today, not least in the social dimensions of the unfolding AIDS epidemic.

The poor; the vulnerable; the unschooled; the socially marginalised; the women and the children; those who bear the burden of colonial legacy - these are the sectors of society which bear the burden of AIDS.

We are concerned at the discrimination and stigmatisation directed at people living with this virus and, in many instances, their families as well.

Beyond the enormous suffering of individuals and families, South Africans are beginning to understand the cost in every sphere of society, observing with growing dismay its impact on the efforts of our new democracy to achieve the goals of reconstruction and development.

It is anticipated that if current trends continue then AIDS will cost South Africa one percent of our GDP by the year 2005; and that up to three quarters of our health budget will be consumed by direct health costs relating to HIV/AIDS.

Though the details may vary from country to country, this experience is one we share with the world.
No country can avoid this disease. The challenge is to seek ways to minimize its effects, to prepare for its impact and to cooperate for long-term solutions.

How will we address child mortality rates which are set to increase threefold in Africa?

With 6 000 new infections occurring every day throughout the world; with 22 million men, women and children infected; with 6 million people estimated to have died; and with 9 million children under the age of 15 having lost their mothers to AIDS, there can be no doubt that humanity faces a major challenge.

The severity of the economic impact of the disease is directly related to the fact that most infected persons are in the peak productive and reproductive age groups.

AIDS kills those on whom society relies to grow the crops, work in the mines and factories, run the schools and hospitals and govern nations and countries, thus increasing the number of dependent persons. It creates new pockets of poverty when parents and breadwinners die and children leave school earlier to support the remaining children.

The epidemic is fuelled by other evils which afflict our world - open conflict and low-intensity war cause population movements and social dislocation which promote the spread of infection.

With cruel irony, even our achievements in improving communication networks and transportation systems, and the building of regional economic blocs, influence the attitudes and behaviour patterns of people in ways that sometimes accelerate the spread of the disease.

These are well-known facts. If we recall them now it is to underline the scale and the multifaceted nature of the problem.

To solve this problem all sectors and all spheres of society have to be involved as equal partners. We have to join hands to develop programmes and share information and research that will halt the spread of this disease and help develop support networks for those who are affected. But individual countries alone cannot succeed.

South Africans achieved victory in their struggle for freedom, thanks to the solidarity of the international community and its commitment to justice. As the freedom of each nation is interdependent with that of others, so too is the health and well-being of their peoples. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of AIDS.

The challenge of AIDS can be overcome if we work together as a global community. Let us join hands in a caring partnership for health and prosperity as we enter the new millennium.

I thank you!