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## Africa renews commitment to HIV/AIDS fight

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 04/12 - The African Union (AU) Commission and UN agencies Tuesday renewed their commitment to halt the spread of HIV/AIDS on the continent, laying emphasis on leadership and prevention as key to bringing the killer disease under control.

Officiating at the launch of 2006 as the year to accelerate HIV prevention in Africa, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi said progress in tackling HIV/AIDS pandemic had not been commensurate with the challenges facing Africa.

"We need to scale up our prevention measures," Meles said, stressing that preventive strategies should be linked with testing, counselling, treatment and care of the infected and affected persons.

Top officials of the African Union (AU) and UN agencies involved in the promotion of human health noted that HIV/AIDS was the single greatest threat to the security and development of much of Africa.

"Policies to promote HIV prevention have been in place for many years. The challenge, however, is to turn these policies into action and reach everyone, everywhere with services on a sustained basis," said AU Commission Chairperson, Alpha Oumar Konare.

He stressed the need to convince the population on the benefits of prevention and change of sexual behaviour. "The challenge requires commitment as well as human and financial resources and a sure supply of prevention tools as well as the dissemination of correct and timely information.

"Accelerating HIV prevention entails reactivating the drive to get service to all people," he added.

Africa has alarming rates of annual HIV infection and AIDS-related deaths, indicating a major gap in prevention efforts.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the region recorded some 2.4 million deaths and more than 12 million orphans from AIDS in 2005.

"After two decades of the pandemic, these figures are not acceptable," declared Luis Gomes Sambo, WHO Regional Director for Africa.

He told a gathering of African diplomats and officials of international organisations attending the function they should strengthen partnerships to support acceleration of HIV preventive interventions in the African region.

The pandemic has had devastating effects on demographic, economic, political and social life of every nation, Sambo said.

"Despite international commitment and increasing resource mobilisation to fight AIDS, the current situation and general trend of HIV/AIDS in terms of morbidity and mortality (in Africa) is alarming.

"In light of current knowledge on mechanisms of transmission and proven preventive interventions, if we scale up preventive interventions, we will reduce the number of new infections," he added.

Experts said Africa requires effective health systems to beef up HIV-preventive strategies.

Meles said Ethiopia, one of the seriously affected countries in the world, had made significant progress in accelerating HIV preventive measures.

At the end of 2005, his country had 658 voluntary counselling and testing centres catering for 451,000 people, a five-fold increase from 2003.

Presently, Ethiopia has 73 hospitals and health centres providing anti-retroviral treatment, in addition to 129 other health facilities that offer services to mothers and infants to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission.

Meles also said that by the end of March 2006, some 23,000 people were receiving free treatment for HIV compared to 900 when the government launched its strategic plan in January 2005.