



By ANDnetwork .com

Posted on the web April 12, 2006

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Ethiopia: Meles underlines need to accelerate activities aimed at preventing HIV/AIDS in Africa

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi underlined the need to accelerate activities aimed at preventing HIV/AIDS in Africa.

While speaking at the launch on Tuesday of the "2006 as the Year for Acceleration of HIV Prevention" in Africa, Meles said many African countries have been implementing prevention interventions which have been reasonably successful.

The Prime Minister, however, said Africa is the only continent that continues to face alarming rates of HIV infection annually, which, he said, indicates a major gap in prevention efforts in our countries.

When one takes into account the fact that HIV/AIDS in our continent disproportionately affects young people and women, one realizes how critical it is for Africa to accelerate its HIV prevention efforts, Meles noted.

Out of the global 4.9 million new infections in 2005 alone, 3.2 million happened in Africa.

However, the Premier said, The impression should not be left that no work has been done in Africa over the past few years to address the challenges we are facing in the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Nevertheless, he noted, the progress made has not been commensurate with the challenges the continent is facing. That is why we need to scale up our prevention measures."

"This is the general direction we are following here in Ethiopia. Our effort is guided by a national strategic plan for intensifying preventive measures.

Meles said community ownership of programs, effective social mobilization and building the capacity of the health care system with a view to putting it at the center of the prevention program has been central to Ethiopia's HIV/AIDS prevention strategy.

Linking prevention with Testing, Counseling, Treatment and Care has also been a central element of the strategy, he added.

Meles pointed out the significant progress that has been made in accelerating the preventive measures. At the end of 2005 we had about 658 voluntary counseling and testing centers catering for 451,000 individuals which is a five-fold increase of what we had in 2003.

Services are being provided to mothers and infants to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV in 129 health facilities, Meles said, adding 73 hospitals and health centers are currently providing anti-retroviral treatment.

The Prime Minister also indicated that some 23,000 people have currently been receiving free treatment as of the end of March 2006, compared to only 900 when the strategic plan was launched in January last year.

Yet, Meles noted, the government fully realizes that this is an extremely modest progress in light of the enormity of the challenge the country faces.

“That is why we are committed to redoubling our efforts and why we believe today's launching of ‘the year 2006 as a Year for Acceleration of HIV prevention is so important,” the Premier said.

Chairperson of AU Commission, Prof. Alpha Oumar Konare on the occasion said the collective efforts of the AU and UN Agencies to organize this launch is the right approach to tackle the immense challenges posed by HIV/AIDS and other problems facing the continent.

Konare said these partnerships will develop further to make the campaign to accelerate HIV prevention a reality in all countries and for all communities.

While Addis Ababa is the site for the main launch, regional launches are also taking place in Pretoria, Ouagadougou and Khartoum and national launches in many other countries.

"Each one of us has an obligation to make our individual and collective contribution in HIV prevention," Konare said.

Rwandan First Lady Jeannette Kagame, who attended the launch in Addis Ababa, on her part said members of the Organization of African First Ladies against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA) are committed to preventing new HIV infections in African communities, especially among children and young people.

"Our ultimate objective is ‘no new infections among youth,’” Mrs. Kagame said. “This is certainly an ambitious goal, but as mothers, we want nothing less for our children."

Mrs. Kagame added, “This is the reason why in September 2005, OAFLA launched a continental youth prevention campaign called ‘Treat Every Child as Your Own.’”

Source : ENA