



REMARKS BY

THE RT. HON. HUBERT A. INGRAHAM

PRIME MINISTER OF THE BAHAMAS

at the United Nations

General Assembly Special Session on

HIV/AIDS

New York, New York

25th June, 2001

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Mr. President:

The Bahamas is pleased to add its voice to the international call for a coordinated, escalated response commensurate with the extent and magnitude of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The direct and indirect cost of HIV/AIDS to our economies, to individuals, to their families, to businesses and to governments is staggering.

The consequences for development, growth, expansion and stability of the economies of the world, especially of the economies of small developing countries, are daunting.

The tragedy which unfolded in the wake of this terrible disease, when so many, for so long, failed to recognize its full dimensions and consequences, has finally attracted the needed and deserved attention of health and political leaders of the world. Let us now resolve to not permit harm to come to our new collective resolve to stem the tide of HIV/AIDS by permitting any agenda, other than that of the promotion of good health, to distract us from

our commitment, or to cause the diversion of scarce funding to conflicting programmes and strategies.

Our meeting here this week is, I believe, an important demonstration of our resolve to defeat this international health terror, together. For his role in bringing us to this point, I wish to recognize, acknowledge and thank the United Nations Secretary General, Mr. Kofi Annan. Special recognition and commendation are also due to UNAIDS.

Mr. President:

In July of last year, G8 countries, meeting in Okinawa, committed to the establishment of a new Global Fund to combat HIV/AIDS, TB and Malaria in developing countries. Because these diseases are responsible for the decimation and disintegration of large percentages of populations in the developing world, the Fund would mobilise, manage and disburse grant resources in support of country and regional level programmes to combat the major health challenges created by them. The Fund would also support national development processes and mechanism created to achieve the goals agreed at the UN Millennium Summit.

My Government strongly endorses and supports the establishment of the Fund and the objectives of its proponents to provide opportunities for donors, with no traditional country base, to fund work directly at national levels; a commendable and helpful objective. I call attention, however, to a concern of small, developing countries, such as my own, with regard to our ability to access a Global Fund given the general absence of resident

donor-based infrastructure or of UN development agency offices in our countries.

And, I wish also to sound a cautionary note that we not place all our eggs in one basket. While we recognize that the Fund must assist in drug acquisition, it is critically important that the urgency of the need for affordable anti-retroviral drugs required for the treatment of HIV/AIDS, and effective drugs for TB and Malaria not result in a disproportionate skew of the assets of the Fund to the supply of drugs.

Access to drugs for treatment is only one of the many important components of the agreed Strategic Plan. Other, equally urgent matters in need of funding, if we, in the developing world, are to better meet the challenges presented by this awful disease, include, but are not limited to: health promotion, advanced research, training, building health infrastructure, forging of partnerships, coordination of networks, and follow-up care.

Mr. President:

No single health problem compares to the threat which HIV/AIDS holds for the continued development and progress of my country, The Bahamas, or my region, the Caribbean.

HIV/AIDS is not confined to any particular sector of Bahamian society. It has spread to the general population predominantly through heterosexual contact and from infected mothers to infants. UNAIDS estimates the prevalence of HIV infection in The Bahamas at 4%. The youth of our country is

especially at risk as well as women and those engaged in dangerous sexual behaviour.

It is small comfort to report that The Bahamas Government early recognized the terrible threat of HIV/AIDS; that recognition did not save us from experiencing the tragedy that AIDS has wrought on a wide scale. However, we believe that it has permitted us to limit the spread of the disease in a way that is commendable and worthy of emulation.

The Bahamas established a National Standing Committee for the Prevention and Control of AIDS in 1985. Initially, this was a Ministry of Health Committee. Today, our National AIDS Programme has evolved into a sophisticated multi-sectoral response involving the Public and Private Sectors of our community, Government Agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations.

The Programme consists of :

- Public Education creating HIV/AIDS awareness and health promotion;
Voluntary counselling and testing;
- The provision of care, treatment and support; and
Research and Surveillance.

Prevention and care are inextricably bound. We have demonstrated this even in the absence of anti-retrovirals. Our

Through the AIDS Foundation of The Bahamas, the AZT intervention programme was introduced in The Bahamas in 1995, providing critical medication and supplies to treat HIV-infected pregnant women in order to reduce the rate of mother to child transmission. The transmission rate has fallen from 30% to 10%. Since 1997, the Government has provided AZT to HIV infected pregnant women free of charge.

Mr. President:

a regional training centre to impact the HIV/AIDS problem. My Government extended that offer in Barbados last September.

In January of this year we commenced training assistance to two sister Caribbean countries Antigua and Barbuda, and Belize. In Belize we have assisted in a training programme involving 18 doctors, nurses and social workers in mother to child HIV/AIDS transmission mitigation protocols. Clearly, such programmes are deserving of funding from international donors such as might come through the Global Fund.

Mr. President:

Our task is urgent, new HIV/AIDS infections recorded in all of our societies on a daily basis are clear indications that notwithstanding progress made AIDS-awareness programmes, whether in schools, churches, or in the wider community, still fail to reach far too many individuals, particularly young people, who continue to engage in high risk, unprotected sexual activity.

Together, I am convinced, we can overcome this challenge.