



*The
Bahamas*

STATEMENT BY

**SENATOR THE HONOURABLE DR. MARCUS C. BETHEL
MINISTER OF HEALTH OF THE COMMONWEALTH
OF THE BAHAMAS**

**TO THE
58TH SESSION OF
THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**HIGH- LEVEL PLENARY MEETINGS DEVOTED TO THE
FOLLOW- UP TO THE OUTCOME OF THE TWENTY- SIXTH
SPECIAL SESSION: IMPLEMENTATION OF
THE DECLARATION OF COMMITMENT ON HIV/AIDS**

SEPTEMBER 22ND , 2003

Please check against delivery

Mr. President

I am pleased to participate in these high level meetings of the General Assembly devoted to the follow-up to the outcome of the twenty-sixth special session on HIV/AIDS and the implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS. Just over two years ago, we came together to adopt an action-oriented, time-bound set of targets and commitments in an effort to combat the deadly HIV/AIDS pandemic, that continues to take its toll on individuals and on the development prospects of many of our nations. This first high-level review is a very timely one, given that the first set of targets in the Declaration fall due in 2003.

Mr. President,

UNAIDS has described the HIV/AIDS epidemic in The Bahamas as a mature, generalized heterosexual epidemic, affecting 4% of the population between 15 and 49 years of age. With these facts in mind, the Commonwealth of The Bahamas has established a multi-disciplinary, integrated and comprehensive National AIDS programme, with significant contributions from many partners, namely the religious community, corporate and civil society. The programme in The Bahamas is a model of success for the Caribbean Region. Care and support of persons with HIV/AIDS has been a major component of our national response, coupled with prevention, epidemiological surveillance, and public education.

The Government of The Bahamas reaffirms its unswerving commitment to the Declaration of Commitment. In these difficult economic times, the Government spent over 5 million dollars in the last year on services to implement our HIV/AIDS strategic plan. During this period the Government has accelerated access to care and support, and has increased the availability of anti-retroviral therapy to persons living with HIV/AIDS. In that same time, we have strengthened HIV/AIDS surveillance, expanded HIV/AIDS education and prevention activities, trained laboratory staff with a view to establishing an HIV/AIDS specialized laboratory and participated in research activities to promote the establishment of a regional HIV/AIDS training and resource centre for the Caribbean region.

Mr. President,

It is the intention of the Government of The Bahamas to provide universal access to antiretroviral therapy by 2005, provided that the cost of anti-retrovirals continues to decrease and that negotiations with Research and Development pharmaceutical companies for reduced prices are successful.

At the special session in 2001, The Bahamas outlined several national targets to combat HIV/AIDS in our nation. It is a source of pride to us that we have started to meet some of these targets. To this end, antiretroviral therapy has been provided to approximately 25% of the targeted population in a one-year period, and all HIV-positive pregnant women received full antiretroviral treatment during and after pregnancy, resulting in a reduction of mother-to-child transmission to 3% in 2002.

With respect to prevention and education, we have sought to target specific high-risk groups, especially young persons, drug users and immigrants. Health

education, with an emphasis on behavioural change, is directed at all segments of the population, including workers, employers, adolescents, school children, police officers and other uniformed services. These efforts have also been extended to our tourism sector. Tourism remains the main engine of growth of The Bahamas economy. At this time, 40% of hotels in The Bahamas have preventive programmes in place, and it is our intention to raise this number, in collaboration with our partners in the industry.

Due to these and other efforts, I am pleased to say that the prevalence rate in The Bahamas has been reduced significantly over the last seven years, and deaths from HIV/AIDS decreased by 50% in 2002, as a direct result of the up-scaling of antiretroviral therapies. Paediatric and adult inpatient admissions have been greatly reduced, as has the average length of hospital stay.

Mr. President,

Despite our success in some areas in combating HIV/AIDS, we continue to face many challenges, particularly in the areas of manpower and technical and financial resources, challenges that must be addressed if we are to sustain our HIV/AIDS programme.

The socio-economic impact of HIV/AIDS has been felt throughout our archipelago. The resources of the Ministry of Social Services and many other Government agencies have been sorely tested by the rate of infection and the growing phenomenon of HIV-orphans.

Accordingly, The Bahamas remains committed to regional and international cooperation in the implementation of the Declaration of Commitment and national and regional strategies to combat HIV/AIDS.

Mr. President,

We must never forget that our task is an urgent one. Combating HIV/AIDS must remain a national and international priority. The direct and indirect costs of HIV/AIDS to individuals, to our economies and to our developmental prospects has been staggering. Let us now reaffirm our collective resolve to stem the tide of HIV/AIDS by implementing the Declaration of Commitment, and not allowing our focus, or our scarce resources to be diverted from this critical task.

Thank you.