

COMMEMORATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CANDLELIGHT MEMORIAL DAY ON 17TH MAY 2020

Theme: Ending AIDS: Faith Communities in Action.

Minister's Statement to the Press on 6TH May 2020 at Uganda Media Centre

Uganda has made a lot of progress in responding to the burden of HIV and AIDS over the last four decades. The HIV prevalence rates in the general population have been reduced from about 18% in the 1990s down to the current 6%. This has positioned Uganda on track to achieve the ambitious goal of ending AIDS as a Public Health Threat by 2030.

Today I am here to remind Ugandans about the International Candlelight memorial day. This is one of the oldest and largest grass root mobilization campaigns for HIV awareness in the World. The day started in 1983 and takes place every third Sunday in May. It is a day when communities stand in solidarity with those who lost their dear ones to AIDS; provide a platform for advocacy and stimulate increased individual resolve and actions to fight the epidemic. It is the day when everyone is called upon to rise up to face the challenges encountered in the fight against HIV and AIDS. In Uganda, since the early 1980s, over 2 million people are estimated to have succumbed to HIV related illness. Annually over 23,000 people die as result

HIV and 50,000 new HIV infections are recorded. Addressing this burden therefore calls for engaging all stakeholders, high-level political commitment and action, enhanced community mobilization and engagement for social and behavior change, respect for the rights of people living with HIV and other vulnerable populations.

On 21st March the Ministry of Health announced the first case of COVID-19 in Uganda and the cases have since risen to 89. H.E. the President has been at the forefront in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic just like has been the case with the fight against HIV and AIDS. So currently a lot of our national efforts are geared towards the management and prevention of COVID-19. However I want to use this opportunity to remind the country that we should not relax our efforts and commitment towards preventing and ending HIV and AIDS.

In 2017, His Excellency President Yoweri Museveni Launched the Presidential Fast Track Initiative on Ending AIDS by 2030 and because of this initiative; a lot of success had been registered by the end of last year. Prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Uganda had already achieved the global UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets and despite the disruptions presented by

COVID-19, we need to guard against reversal of these gains and ensure that we are on course to end AIDS as a public health threat in Uganda by 2030.

As part of our efforts to ensure that we do not lose track of our efforts during the current COVID-19 pandemic, I want to use this opportunity to announce that the annual HIV Candlelight commemorative activities usually held in the Month of May will climax on May 17th 2020. These are going to be carried out in a scientific way that takes into consideration the existing Presidential guidelines on social distancing. It is against this background that this year's candlelight activities are going to be carried out without assemblies of people due to COVID-19. It is recommended that members of the public participate in this year's memorial virtually by sharing actions on various media platforms including social media, radio, newspaper and TVs. The COVID-19 pandemic dictates a change in approach from the traditional national commemoration characterized with mass mobilization that is crowned off by a huge public gathering in a selected district.

I also therefore want to use this occasion to remind all leaders but especially Resident District Commissioners (RDCs) that in the application of the existing guidelines please ensure that People Living with HIV are supported to maintain their regular access to medication. This will also ensure that the

country does not lose out on the HIV gains that we have achieved over the years. Under the 90-90-90 challenge, 90 percent of people living with HIV are expected to know their status, 90% of those who know their status should have access to treatment and 90% of those on treatment should have their viral load suppressed, all of these by 2020.

I commend civil society partners who have been actively engaging with local government leaders to minimize disruption of access to HIV services and ensure adherences to antiretroviral therapy during this lockdown period.

I encourage people living with HIV to utilize their networks within their communities to access the health units for refills of ARVs and there adhere so as the achieve the third ninety of ensuring that viral load is kept low at undetectable levels.

Uganda AIDS Commission and partners including the Ministry of Information, Communication Technology & National Guidance; Ministry of health and the Inter-religious Council of Uganda will therefore use this commemoration season to firmly push out messages countrywide regarding prevention of COVID-19 as well as HIV prevention in addition to fighting stigma and discrimination.

I want to specifically highlight Partnership approach in ending AIDS coordinated by Uganda AIDS Commission. It is because of this strategic approach that we have been able to register a lot of progress. This year, Government has engaged the religious leaders through the Inter Religious Council of Uganda (IRCU) to take lead in mobilizing communities towards our national goal of ending AIDS by 2030. The national theme for Candlelight this year is **Ending AIDS: Faith Communities in Action.**

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the work done by religious leaders. I specifically thank the Archbishop of the Church of Uganda who is also representing the Inter Religious Council of Uganda here today, the Most Reverend Dr. Stephen Mugalu Kazimba for accepting to be here today to drum up more mobilization of all the faithfuls towards ending AIDS. Religious leaders have played a key role in ensuring that we end AIDS in Uganda by 2030. I want to thank the community of People Living with HIV who have been the face of this epidemic represented here by Dr. Stephen Watiti for your vigilance in living positively and commitment to end new HIV infections. Government is appreciative of the support from Development Partners towards ending AIDS in Uganda.

Finally yet importantly, I thank the media for your tireless efforts to carry accurate information to the Public. I invite you to support us in running a Media campaign throughout this month of May on prevention of HIV and COVID-19. We shall have a Candle lighting commemorative event on 17th May as the highlight of the campaign.

For God and My Country

Esther M. Mbayo (MP)

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