The National AIDS Commission and its partners commemorate this year World AIDS Day on Tuesday 1st December 2015 at the Kenema City Plaza. This year's event which is held with the theme "Fast-track to end AIDS: get tested" has the former Vice President of Uganda Dr. Speciosa Wandira Kazibwe as a special Guest of Honour.



Launching of the HIV/AIDS National Strategic Plan 2016 - 2020

Delivering the commemoration message the Minister of Health and Sanitation who represented His Excellency Dr. Ernest Bai Koroma thanked the people of Kenema for hosting the World's AIDS Day,as this was part of government's devolved commitment in bringing its people closer. The function was capped with the launching of the 2016 strategy geared towards reducing new HIV infections to zero.

This strategy is already anchored by the promise enshrined in President Koroma's speech in which he virtually declared that all HIV/AIDS services shall be delivered free of charge at all government health facilities. UNAIDS statistics indicate that HIV prevalence in Sierra Leone has stabilized at 1.5% since 2008. "We shall also ensure that violation of human right of people living with HIV shall not go unpunished," he stated. The Minister revealed that the government has committed more resources to the fight against AIDS in the country. The Minister encouraged the private sector to join the government in making the pledge that they would finance HIV and AIDS programmes targeting their employees and clients as part of their corporate responsibility.

The United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone, Dr. Bennet Ndyanabangi, in a statement from the United Nations Secretary General said the window of opportunity to act is

closing, which call for the need to have a fast-track approach to grant load investments and close the gap between needs and services. Ending the AIDS epidemic means that adolescent girls and young women have access to education and appropriate HIV and sexual and reproductive health services. It means key populations, such as people who inject drugs and transgender people, have full access to health services delivered with dignity and respect. And it means that every child is born free from HIV, and that they and their mothers not only survive but thrive. The Resident Coordinator also called for the need to fast track target with all new HIV infections and AIDS related deaths while eliminating HIV related stigma and discrimination.

To climax the event was an address made by The Guest of Honour. The organizers had sat the young girls in a separate tent a little away from the high table, but when she rose up to speak, and in consonance with Jesus' preaching, she asked for them to be brought closer. This was Dr. Speciosa Wandira-Kazibwe, Champion for an AIDS Free Generation, who is also former Uganda Vice President and currently Member of the African Union Panel of the Wise. She was officiating at the World AIDS Day Celebrations held in Kenema, Sierra Leone.

Appreciating the dire Global AIDS prevalence rates among especially young girls, the Champions have set their targets on these as the frontline for attacking



AIDS in view of achieving zero new infections by 2030. The celebrations in Sierra Leone were therefore a perfect platform to nail this message, and the young girls at the occasion needed to listen to it loud and clear. "Guard your Tutu jealously", Dr. Speciosa emphasized as she took a shot at the popular Kriol language. And at the mention of "Tutu", the audience burst into a thunderous applause, for it spoke to everyone's imagination. "Tutu" is a loose reference to especially the female sexual organ, but it could equally apply to the male, both being the key tools for AIDS transmission. She urged the young girls to remain committed to education as their source of empowerment, adding that the days when girls and women looked at men for protection are way behind us.

Earlier in the day, Dr. Wandira paid a courtesy call to the Minister of Health and Sanitation Dr. Abu Bakarr Fofana and was greeted with passionate praise directed to the Government of Uganda for the immense support offered to Sierra Leone in fighting the deadly Ebola, which left about 4000 people dead. The minister mentioned the Ugandan doctors by name led by Dr. Monica Musenero. It is believed that the onslaught of Ebola caused a slump in the uptake of HIV services and deterred people living with HIV from adhering to treatment, care and support. But in a tone of defiance, Dr. Wandira reiterated that if Sierra Leone could fight the deadly Ebola, then it is now capable of even fighting AIDS since the cause is known and preventable.

In a statement read by a representative of the Executive Director of NETHIPS,Patrick M Kpakra, called for a renewed commitment to fight all forms of stigma and discrimination in all sectors in society.”We must provide necessary care and support to children in our communities who through no fault of theirs have become orphans and vulnerable due to HIV. Let us come together as a nation and wage war on AIDS pandemic for the sake of our children,” He said.

Miss Miatta Jambawai, Country Programme Manager for AIDS Healthcare Foundation, said “together we can end AIDS if we actively support the HIV response and the concerns with people living with HIV as it was done for Ebola and Ebola survivors,”

Other leaders Present at the celebrations included the Kenema City Council Mayor, His Worship Joseph Samba Keifala, Resident Minister East, Hon. Maya Moiwo Kaikai, and officials from UNAIDS and UNDP. They all committed to ensuring positive results in the new strategy. The Director General of The National HIV/AIDs Secretariat, Alhaji Dr. Momodu Sesay, gave the vote of thanks.

By Courtesy of Ibrahim Kamara

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