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Secretary-General's press encounter with Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS

SG: Good morning, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is a great pleasure to see you again. I am very pleased to be joined by Dr. Michel Sidibé, who is working as Executive Director of UNAIDS. I would like to congratulate and commend his very strong leadership and commitment and vision in addressing this global AIDS epidemic.

Since he took his new position we have been working together very closely.

This is yet another very important opportunity for the General Assembly and the international community to address global health issues.

As you know, yesterday we had a very successful Forum on Advancing Global Health in the Face of Crisis. Today, the General Assembly is reviewing progress and implementation of important United Nations commitment in addressing this global epidemic HIV/AIDS.

While I am very much encouraged by such progress and support from the international community in preventing and supporting and treating and caring for HIV/AIDS, we have to again, unfortunately, fight against [inaudible] this kind of prejudice, discrimination and stigma. As you know, I have been putting priority in trying to create some necessary and a very good atmosphere for those people living with HIV to be integrated completely into our society, into our job environment. I have been meeting regularly with UN staff who are living with HIV, and I have been participating in many international conferences, like the one in Mexico last year. I met hundreds of people to encourage them to actively integrate themselves without any fear of stigma and discrimination.

These efforts will continue.

Right after this, I am going to meet with the people of World AIDS Campaign representatives, who are actively engaging in fighting against HIV/AIDS.

Again, I thank you very much for your support, and I really commend the role of Dr. Sidibé.

I would like to turn to Dr. Sidibé.

Dr. Sidibé: Thank you very much, Mr. Secretary-General. I would like to start by saying that the leadership of the Secretary-General is helping us to break the conspiracy of silence on stigma, discrimination and criminalization against people living with HIV, particularly amongst vulnerable groups –homosexuals, sex workers, drug users. That is certainly one of the major breakthroughs in term of preventing HIV.

In other terms, I want to say also that time is running out. Like the Secretary-General just mentioned this morning, we had a global commitment in 2006 for universal access, and 2010 is on the corner. Unfortunately we are far from reaching our goals. It is time to not falter in our efforts and not use the financial crisis, economic crisis, as a reason, an excuse, to abandon those 4 million people who are on treatment, to really help to continue to have hope for those 14 million orphans who are expecting to continue to have access to services.

I want to say again that if the leaders of the world have a political responsibility to fix the market, they have a moral obligation to also to continue to support those millions of people without a voice. Thank you.

Q: Which member countries of the UN are not being helpful or transparent in recognizing that more needs to be done regarding AIDS?

Sidibé: Today, I would like to tell you that 80 countries are having homophobic laws –80 countries in the world. It is important for us to continue, with the support of the Secretary-General, to remove those punitive laws which are really blocking the people from having access to life-saving services. Eighty countries in the world today are having homophobic laws.

Q: Half the membership of the UN General Assembly?

Sidibé: It is important to start somewhere and I am very happy that already with the Secretary-General we are talking about putting in place a mechanism which can help us – region by region - to visit the laws which are existing and help us to move on these issues.

Q: A lot of these countries that have these prohibitions are in the Islamic world, where for example homosexuality is seen as plain and simple wrong and illegal. Don't you think it is problematic for the UN to be going to these countries and saying 'you have to change the way you govern your country' even though that is under the principles of a religion?

Sidibé: You know discrimination and criminalization against man having sex with man is not just in the Islamic world. When I was saying 80 countries are having homophobic laws –it is across the world. I was myself, with the support of the Secretary-General, in Senegal meeting with the President of Senegal to make sure that at least with his effort that people who have been arrested there because they were homosexual, could be free. Senegal did it, and the President with the Ministry of Justice managed to harbour really protective laws to make sure that it would not happen.

Q: But even if it is beyond the Islamic world, isn't it problematic for a secular organization to be trying to advocate and tell countries who have a religious government how to behave?

Sidibé: Yes, I think also we need to take into account cultures and religions when we are dealing with difficult issues, sensitive issues, like homophobia. It is very important to integrate that in our approach. That is what we are doing and we are working closely with those respective countries to make sure that those laws will not be against their cultures.

Q: Mr. Secretary-General, you had a printed statement on Georgia last night. How painful is it for you as a Secretary-General to close up a United Nations [peacekeeping] mission you had wanted to keep? Can there be anything done to save it?

SG: As you know, I issued my statement last night after the Security Council had not approved my proposal. It is regrettable that the Security Council was not able to agree on a very realistic and practical package of proposals for the stabilization and peace and security in the region.

I have instructed, in accordance with the Security Council decision, my Special Representative, Mr. Johan Verbeke, to take all necessary administrative measures, in close consultation with the parties concerned. They have been instructed to cease operations effective as of midnight on June 15, yesterday.

I hope that we will be able to continue to find some ways and means on how to ensure peace and security in the region. I am going to consult on this matter with Security Council members.

Q: On Iran, should there be a recount in that country? The French Prime Minister is calling it a fraud, what happened there. What do you think?

SG: I have taken note of all these statements coming from Iran and elsewhere, and I am very closely following the situation. As I said yesterday, what is important is that the genuine will of the Iranian people should be fully respected in a most transparent and objective and fair manner. I note that the Iranian religious leaders have instructed to look into this matter. I am just seeing how the situation will develop in that country.

Q: ?on the right of return of Palestinians in Palestine?Mr. Netanyahu doesn't seem to raise the issue. This is a big thorny issue in Lebanon and in Syria and elsewhere in the Arab world. How do you think this matter will be resolved?

SG: I am going to discuss this matter with my counterparts in the Quartet later this month. First of all, I think this is a very historic moment for all the parties concerned, including Israel, to seize this moment. We have been wasting too long on the peace and security in the Middle East. I sincerely hope that on the basis of a two state vision, Israel and the Palestinians will immediately begin their negotiations. They should take all the necessary implementing activities on the basis of the Roadmap and all other guidelines which have been set out by the international community.

I sincerely hope again, as I have been repeatedly speaking to Israeli leaders, to look at the reality and to be very sincere about what they can do to contribute to peace and stability in the region. This is very important.

Q: On a personal note, John Sawers is going to be the British spy chief. How do you feel about his final days here, working with the soon-to-be man known as "C"? Will you be calling him "C"? John Sawers, the British Ambassador, is going to be the British intelligence leader.

SG: That is a decision of the British government. I respect the decisions of all the Member States for their personnel appointments. Thank you very much.