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HEADLINE: PODIUM: THE DISEASE THAT CHALLENGES BUSINESS

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Kofi Annan

From the first Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Lecture

given by the UN Secretary General at the Bank of England

LET ME thank the National Aids Trust for organising this event, and for this opportunity to speak about the global challenge of HIV-Aids, which ranks high among the concerns of the United Nations. In fact, there can never have been a disease that is so international.

I want to speak particularly about the devastating impact of Aids on the developing world - especially on Africa. But I also want to tell you some good news - about new kinds of cross-border and cross-sector partnership which are making the world a better, safer place. And I want to tell you how business leaders, in particular, can and must respond in larger numbers and more varied ways to the challenge of the Aids epidemic.

The missing piece, the secret weapon we crave, remains an effective vaccine. Through its international Vaccine Advisory Committee, UN Aids provides a forum for global planning and co-ordination. Research partners include the Medical Research Council of the United Kingdom and the International Aids Vaccine Initiative. This initiative succeeded in raising funds from governments, starting with the United Kingdom last year; from business leaders, such as Bill Gates, who has pledged \$ 25m dollars; and from society at large.

No company and no government can take on the challenge of Aids alone. What is needed is a new approach to public health - combining all available resources, public and private, and using all opportunities, local and global.

If the money is found it will not be wasted. Experience in Uganda and Thailand - to name just two developing countries - has shown that there can be real success in reducing new infections, when the scale of HIV and Aids is acknowledged and there is a well thought-out, well-funded prevention response.

Business can play a critical role, by providing a venue for HIV education and by giving leadership within the wider community. Increasingly, business leaders recognise that their responsibility - and their interest - lies not only in how their actions affect their shareholders, but in their impact on the societies in which they operate, and on the planet as a whole.

The spread of Aids is partly a tragic by-product of globalisation. At least we now see the beginnings of a global response. The global business council on HIV/Aids, in which Glaxo Wellcome has played a leading role, is helping to mobilise resources. You in the National Aids Trust have now taken the initiative in establishing a UK business council on HIV and Aids as part of this network. I hope other countries will soon follow. So today I should like to issue three challenges to business, whether here in the United Kingdom, in other industrialised countries, or in the developing world.

First, embrace your workforce and their families, by working to end prejudice and discrimination against those affected by Aids. Allow people with HIV to continue working, and so to remain useful members of society.

Second, do everything you can to protect the communities where you work, by preventing the spread of HIV in your workplaces and beyond. You can do this by spreading Aids awareness and by distributing condoms.

And third, look to the global picture: realise the implications of this world epidemic, and join in the effort to combat it. Join forces with the many organisations - governmental and non-governmental - which are in the forefront of the fight for survival.

To Diana, Princess of Wales, were she with us today, I would say this. You won the hearts of millions by acknowledging your own human vulnerability. And you were among the first in this country to fight the conspiracy of silence and prejudice against Aids.

Maybe it was precisely your own vulnerability that gave you the commitment to match your compassion. Maybe that was what gave you your singular gift for listening, your need to hear and to help, your courage to speak up on behalf of the most vulnerable on this Earth. Maybe that was what gave you your talent for making others want to do the same.

Perhaps it takes that special kind of sensitivity to do what Diana did. The rest of us can only draw inspiration from it. Faced with her example, we simply cannot leave the neediest on this Earth to needless death and degradation. She gave too much, and cared too deeply, for us not to honour her memory with action.

For Diana, for the millions living with Aids today, and the many more who will live under its shadow tomorrow, we must seize the chance now, or bear the shame for ever.

Is the choice really so hard?

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