



ADDRESS BY

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TO

**THE SPECIAL UNITED NATIONS
GENERAL ASSEMBLY SESSION**

ON HIV/AIDS

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Great events make fascinating history; but commonplace occurrences often have greater influence on our lives.

Historians have recorded that the First World War of 1914 to 1918 took a terrible toll of eight million lives. Few recall, however, that the influenza epidemic that broke out after the war killed twenty million people.

It is not unknown for epidemics to devastate nations and regions.

The present pandemic of HIV/AIDS could however make all previous epidemics look trifling by comparison. For HIV/AIDS is not just a health crisis. It is an economic and social threat that could lead to a planetary catastrophe of unprecedented proportions. It has the potential to reverse the social and economic achievements of the last half century and to engender a state of global insecurity in which governments fall and societies crumble.

This Special Session of the UN General Assembly on HIV/AIDS is timely. Let us hope it is not too late. To be sure, we do not have a moment to lose.

The Caribbean has the highest number of reported AIDS cases in the Americas. Its rate of HIV infection is second only to that of Sub-Saharan Africa, which has borne the worst brunt of the disease. Even more ominous, HIV/AIDS is the leading cause of death among young people in the Caribbean.

The Caribbean, except during the era of genocide and slavery, has never lost large numbers of its young people in wars or natural disasters. We are in danger now of losing to HIV/AIDS one of the most educated and creative generations in the history of the Caribbean. This tragedy would put the promise of twenty-first century sustainable development beyond our reach.

But let us not labour under any delusions. HIV/AIDS is not a Caribbean nor African nor developing world problem. It is a world problem, reflecting our common but fragile humanity. Even those countries with the lowest rates of infection and highest rates of survival cannot quarantine themselves from this global pandemic without resorting to the most nightmarish of totalitarian measures.

There must be a way forward which relates to the universality of the threat we face in common.

What we need now therefore is a global emergency response that will support regional and national programmes to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The response should be a three pronged approach that focuses on:

Providing effective information and education on how to avoid infection, especially to young people, the poor and other vulnerable groups;

Improved treatment and care of those infected and living with HIV/AIDS without the stigmatisation and bigotry that has too often characterised our dealing with those suffering from this disease;

An intensified search for a cure and vaccine.

The Caribbean has already taken steps along these lines to fight the disease.

A Pan-Caribbean Partnership Against HIV/AIDS was launched in Barbados in February as a broad coalition of stakeholders, including people living with AIDS, aimed at providing a multi-sectoral approach to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The Partnership covers all the countries of the region and aims to reduce the rate of infection and improve the extent and quality of treatment. It will draw on the Caribbean Regional Strategic Plan of Action approved by CARICOM Heads of Government in July 2000.

At the national level, Barbados has designed its own comprehensive programme for the management, treatment and care of people infected by HIV/AIDS. My Government has pledged just under US\$100 million over the next five years, and is currently negotiating a US\$15 million loan from the World Bank to help fund the national programme.

We regard this matter as being sufficiently important to warrant the extraordinary step of a petition to the World Bank, from whose loan programme we graduated in 1999, to re-admit us to borrowing to support the initiative.

In addition in order to signal both the gravity and priority of the national fight against HIV/AIDS, in September last year I assumed responsibility, as Prime Minister, for the co-ordination of the national HIV/AIDS programme.

Subsequently, the Government has this month established a broad-based National HIV/AIDS Commission, chaired by the Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS, to advise on policy and to co-ordinate the implementation of the national programme.

But all our national and regional efforts in the fight against HIV/AIDS require massive financial support from the international community.

Barbados commends the work of the many UN agencies and other international organisations in the fight against AIDS, and we fully support the Secretary-General's call for the establishment of a Global Fund for AIDS and Health.

I however cannot stress enough that the HIV/AIDS pandemic is not just a health problem but is more so the most serious threat to global security that now exists.

A threat to human security of this order of magnitude, in any other sphere of human endeavour, would inspire a vast and commensurate mobilisation of institutional and financial resources.

Nothing less is now required to halt and to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS. We dare not fail. For the price of failure would be to commit mankind to a future as bleak as at any time in the history of humanity.

It would be to commit mankind to the possibility of no future.