**Taking The HIV Test Is A Personal Decision To Achieving Target Of Zero New Infection**

Today, as we have done since December 1, 1988, we join the world in marking World Aids Day. We take a moment to remind ourselves that HIV has not gone away, and that although so much has been done in fighting it, there is still a lot more to be done. We join the international community in committing to increase awareness, fight prejudice, and improve education on Aids.

And we stand together to reflect on the debt we owe to the infected and those who have succumbed to this disease. We recognise their families, caregivers, and communities who have to cope every day with the burden of this disease.

As a nation, we have a reason to smile even in the midst of the devastation and pain that HIV and Aids continue to cause. We can look back and say that, as a result of the interventions we have undertaken since Aids was declared a national disaster in 1999, we have made good progress.

An estimated 1.5 million Kenyans are living with HIV. Those are many people. But there is remarkable progress. In 2009, 80,000 died from Aids-related illnesses, down from 150,000 in 2003.

Our HIV prevalence rate, which peaked in 2000 at 13.4 per cent, up from 5.1 per cent in 1990, has been on a downward trend. The infection rate currently stands at 6.3 per cent.

That is good news that is still bad enough. Bad because the percentages may be falling, but as long as they stand, they mean people are still getting sick and dying.

It is also bad because women, traditionally marginalised, are disproportionately affected by HIV/Aids. In 2008/9, prevalence among women was at 8 per cent, compared to men's 4.3 per cent.

We know that women form the backbone of our economy, particularly in the rural areas. This high infection among them is, therefore, a policy issue crying for intervention.

As a nation, we can be proud that treatment and care for those living with HIV/Aids has tremendously improved, particularly since 2003 when the concept of Comprehensive Care Centres was introduced.

This has seen the number of patients on antiretroviral drugs increase to 336,980 in 2009, up from 172,000 in 2007. Several support groups are working to alleviate the suffering of those living with HIV/Aids and encourage positive living.

But we are yet to overcome stigma. Many people living with HIV/Aids still face discrimination. It is necessary to put in place education programmes and to implement policies to address this.

I call upon employers to implement workplace HIV/Aids policies currently in force. We also need to implement the Kenya National HIV/Aids Communication Strategy for the Youth.

The government is doing its part. We have committed to spend $34 million (Sh3 billion) annually for five years on Aids programmes from 2009 to 2013.

We appreciate the external financiers who between them pay 85 per cent of our expenditure on HIV/Aids.

As a government, we have enabled the creation of more voluntary testing and counselling centres. We have improved availability of safe blood supplies and injections, expanded maternal child care, and management of sexually transmitted infections.

We have emphasised behaviour change and we continue to encourage our youth to delay sexual debut. We encourage female sex workers to take precautions against infection.

The government has established circumcision centres across the country and male circumcision rates have increased from 10,000 to 90,000 in just over one year since 2009.

We have not been left behind in providing the highly active antiretrovirals, which have reduced the mortality and morbidity associated with HIV/Aids. Our institutions continue to participate actively in research on post-exposure prophylaxis and the vaccine against HIV.

In the end, however, it is incumbent upon each one of us to make a personal decision. Last Sunday, I took an HIV test in Kibera. It was one of many that I have taken in recent years. Taking the test matters. Ultimately, people need to know their status if they are to benefit from the initiatives we are making.

Only when we all agree to take the test shall we rightfully join the global community in moving towards the target of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination, and zero Aids-related deaths.

*Mr. Odinga is the Prime Minister of Kenya.*