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**Looking to Africa for Aids-free generation**

By DESMOND TUTU & ANTHONY LAKE

A generation born free of HIV and Aids is within the world’s reach — and Africa is at a tipping point.

Today, paediatric HIV and Aids is virtually a thing of the past almost everywhere in the world. Everywhere except Africa during a decade of progress in using antiretroviral medication to prevent maternal-to-child transmission of HIV.

In fact, nine out of 10 pregnant women with HIV today live in Africa; so do nine out of 10 children living with HIV. Every day, 1,000 African babies are born with HIV. The majority will not receive treatment. Without it, half will die before reaching their second birthdays.

We should all be outraged by this tragic loss of young life. We have the power to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV everywhere, and it is time we used that power to save hundreds of thousands of lives. It is not a question of knowledge. It is a question of priorities and political will.

This means a sustained commitment by African governments to include dedicated funding for PMTCT in their national health budgets.

Only five out of 53 African countries have met their commitment to the Abuja Declaration to allocate at least 15 per cent of their annual budgets to health care — and very few have dedicated funding to paediatric HIV and Aids.

Some countries are taking action. Kenya, for example, has set an ambitious goal of decreasing paediatric HIV infections from 27 per cent to 8 per cent by 2013. Last year, the Kenyan government set aside $11.25 million (Sh900 million) to purchase anti-retroviral medication for pregnant women.

Achieving a generation free of HIV and Aids is also a global imperative, requiring renewed commitment by donors, international agencies, civil society, and the private sector.

Last month Kenya became the first country to begin distributing the Mother Baby Pack, “take-home boxes” that contain all the drugs needed to protect the health of one mother and her infant. Soon, Cameroon, Lesotho, and Zambia will also begin distribution of the packs to accelerate their own PMTCT efforts.

Clearly, the key to success is partnership at every level. The Campaign to End Paediatric HIV/Aids (Cepa), an African civil society partnership, is galvanising action to end paediatric HIV/Aids, starting in six African nations.

The Global Fund to Fight HIV/Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, a global public/private partnership, is providing significant funding to expand HIV prevention and treatment efforts in Africa.

But the current funding levels are only enough to sustain existing outreach efforts — and Africa cannot afford to wait. With inadequate dedicated funding, fewer than half of the HIV-positive pregnant women in sub-Saharan Africa will receive life-prolonging anti-retroviral medication.

Without these medicines, up to 40 per cent of the infants born to these mothers will develop HIV; with them, that rate plummets to 5 per cent.

These numbers speak for themselves — and the choice is ours to make. It is a matter of priorities. It is a matter of life and death. This World Aids Day, we must all recommit ourselves to saving lives — by taking bold action today to secure an Aids-free tomorrow.

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