THIS VIRUS DOESN’T RESPECT ANYBODY

Mr President, is HIV on

your national agenda?

DEAR SIR,

I want to talk to you, not as an activist, but as a mother. First, congratulations for the 100-plus days in office. I can imagine how tough it must be to work for the entire country. I work with a communitybased organisation that reaches about 60,000 households. It gives me sleepless nights, so I cannot fathom what you are up against.

I was wondering if I could get a visit to State House. If only you found time

in your super-busy schedule, I would share some things with you face to face without the media and the intimidating security detail. The issues I want to talk about concern the very life of this blessed nation.

I am concerned, Mr President. I have not heard a single comment from you on HIV. Is it out of fear or you simply do not want to mention it?

It would be remarkable if in the meetings you go to, you say how you are championing the fight and struggle to defeat Aids and how you are helping orphans and vulnerable children, widows and grandmothers. It is hard to interpret what your silence on the matter means.

As a person living with HIV, at times

I feel threatened in a very personal way. My life hangs on political will and financial support of other nations, other

than my own country. Sir, does it worry anyone in your government that today if

the (US) President’s Emergency Plan for

Aids Relief (PEPFAR) or the Global Fund withdrew funding to antiretroviral therapy

(ART), my days would be numbered? What is more, my five boys, four of whom escaped HIV courtesy of antiretrovirals, would join the statistics of orphans in Kenya. This also applies to almost halfa- million other people living with HIV and on ART. It applies to the nearly 800,000 others waiting to be put on treatment.

What is your government doing about this?

There is the financial support for vulnerable groups every two or so months.

However, this is not realistic, considering

the challenges these citizens bear. I mean, a kilogramme of flour costs the same for everyone, irrespective of the level of income.

I urge you to put your foot down

and introduce an affordable package for these people, especially children. This will make them aware of your personal concern and commitment about their issues.

Sir, kindly advise the Ministry of Education that when they select top students

to join national schools, there should be a slot for such children. They may not

perform as well as their counterparts because of antiretrovirals, which affect their brains. Regardless, they deserve a

chance.

I take antiretroviral drugs. At times I cannot remember what I read only a few seconds before. God knows how these children keep their memories active for tough exams. It is no wonder that some perform poorly in school. Still, they are our children and we owe them justice and love.

To date, no single parliamentarian nor high office holder has publicly declared their HIV status. I am not insinuating

anything. I know there is such a thing as stigma and denial in high places. This

virus does not respect anybody. Our leaders

who are living with HIV need help,

although they may not say it because

they do not want to lose face with the

electorate.

I know this is difficult, Mr President, but

I wish you could set up a parliamentary

post-test club. For those who test HIVpositive,

something needs to be done

so that their positions do not become an

impediment for them to tell publicly how

they are living positively.

Your father, Jomo Kenyatta, mentioned

elimination of disease as one of this

country’s development priorities. He did

not know about Aids. He would turn in his

grave if you allowed his granddaughter,

Ngina, to live in fear of contracting HIV.

Mr President, if today my son,

Peter, met and proposed to Ngina, and

this could happen, I am sure you would

want to know my son’s HIV status. This

worry can be a thing of the past if your

government makes smart and strategic

investments towards ensuring universal

access to Aids treatment services, zero

new infections, zero Aids-related deaths,

and zero stigma.

I would not want my children and

future generations to go through what I

did. This is the reason I call for not only

your personal attention, but also a policy

commitment to this national cause.

Finally, please tweet my twin boys,

Baraka and Gabriel, happy five months.

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-five who tested HIV-positive 26

years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with

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