

Speech before United Nations University Tokyo, Japan (2004)

Introduction

Youth have the power to change the future. Youth of today are well-educated; they are brimming with knowledge in information technology, conservation and environmental awareness and are well-informed on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the scourge of Africa. The AIDS epidemic is of paramount importance, and needs youth interaction, as it is not only a problem of today, but will affect future of generations to come.

There are 6 billion people living in the world today. According to the December 2003 UN Programme on HIV/AIDS, 38 million of them are living with HIV, this is a 3-million person increase in only 2 years. Notably, more than 50% of HIV/AIDS-infected people are between the ages of 15-24. Suddenly, our generation is faced with several problems that it previously did not face. Today, I will focus on the problem of HIV/AIDS. So as to inform you of the fundamental aspects of this disease, how all youth need to get involved in containing it, and how South Africa, in particular, can benefit from Japanese youth interaction. My hope is that we will realise the significance of getting involved and all be inspired to join in the fight against this epidemic, despite the fact that the AIDS scourge has affected Africa significantly more at present than it has affected Japan.

Body

My spiritual belief is that we are all connected. This forms the basis of requesting your involvement with Africa and the AIDS situation. What affects me in Africa will eventually affect you in Japan, and vice versa. We are one. We are a global community, connected by technology, spirituality and human compassion. The greatest challenge for our generation is to remember this and constantly act upon it.

Global history has documented wars and conflicts that have arisen because one nation (or individual) assumes that it is superior over another. This false illusion creates separation amongst human beings. Inevitably, it will prevent us from getting to know each other, working together and helping each other.

In Southern Africa, we have a term called *Ubuntu*, which refers to the spirit of the community. I am a firm believer of *Ubuntu* and its spiritual connotations, as it exemplifies that I am a person through other people. It means that my humanity is tied to yours. Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls it “the essence of being human.” Furthermore, he believes that it is a part of the gift that Africa can give to the world. Where it can, Africa will open its arms to assisting other countries, and in turn, countries that have the infrastructure, financial means and compassion need to help Africa. *Ubuntu* encapsulates that spirit of conflict resolution without war, but rather with love, communication and an understanding and acceptance of cultures different from your own.

Now think about this: According to UNAIDS, Sub-Saharan Africa has an estimated 26.6 million people living with HIV/AIDS. Last year, approximately 3.2 million new infections occurred in this region. In just one year, the epidemic has claimed the lives of an estimated 2.3 million Africans. Worldwide, ten million young people, between ages 15 and 24, and almost 3 million children under 15 are living with HIV. Currently, there are around 11 million children that have been orphaned by AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa. These statistics are rising every day. One thing is certain: people in Africa need to be educated and made aware of AIDS, how it is spreads, and how to live with this life-threatening disease.

In four southern African countries, the national adult HIV prevalence rate has risen higher than was thought possible and now exceeds 30%. These countries are Swaziland (38.6%), Botswana (37.5%), Zimbabwe (33.7%), and Lesotho (31.5%). Africa desperately requires youth from first-world countries like Japan to interact with HIV/AIDS survivors, and educators, and assist with counselling services. Most importantly, Africa needs financial assistance, so that antiretrovirals can be purchased and distributed and shelters and clinics set up to help those living with the disease.

In many Sub-Saharan African countries, AIDS is erasing decades of progress made in extending life expectancy. The average life expectancy in Sub-Saharan Africa is now 47 years, as opposed to 62 years. Millions of people are dying before adulthood or in early their middle ages, leaving a void in the generation so fundamental to building and

maintaining Africa. The toll of HIV/AIDS on households is severe. Families are losing their income earners. Many of those dying have surviving partners who are themselves infected and in need of care. They also leave behind children grieving and struggling to survive without parental care. The elder children are often left to raise the family and are forced to scrape together money for food, funerals, education, as well as caring for those at home. Realize that these are children and young people no older than you, or your siblings, or friends. HIV/AIDS is not only a disease: it is a scourge that strips the family assets, further impoverishing the poor. In many cases, the presence of AIDS means that the household will eventually dissolve. AIDS is more than a problem now. It is a disease that has left millions homeless, destitute and alone.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic leaves still more problems in its wake. In all affected countries, the pandemic imposes additional pressure on the health sector. As the disease matures, the demand for HIV/AIDS care has risen, leaving a burdensome toll on health services and workers. Health-care services though, face varying levels of strain, depending on the number of people who seek them, the nature of their need, and their capacity to deliver that care. Also a decline in school enrollment is one of the most visible effects of the epidemic on education and literacy levels in Africa. How schools and other educational institutions are able to cope is a major factor in how well societies will eventually recover from the HIV/AIDS endemic.

The disease additionally affects labour, hindering economic activity and social progress. Because the disease has primarily affected an age-group that is at the prime of its working life, employers, schools, factories and hospitals in turn, have had to train other staff to replace those immobilized by illness. What happens in the future when the replacement workers are no longer able to work or work as much? HIV/AIDS will place a significant brake on economic growth and development as economic activity and national production will decline. This will position countries facing these labor problems at even greater disadvantages. Hence, Africa has been economically stunted by the epidemic, which in turn, decreases its ability to properly deal with and eradicate the disease. Worldwide, the global economy, will suffer as well.

Africa uses Japan as a good model of economic efficiency, social equity and infrastructure ability. Thus, I make this appeal to you: that Japan intensify its contributions to this global fight against AIDS. Is Japan doing anything about the fight against AIDS? Yes! But not enough. Masaki Inaba of Africa Japan Forum has said that Japan's contribution to tackle global HIV/AIDS problem is far from enough. Given that Japan has the second largest economy in the world, the scale of its funding should match its economic scale. The total amount of Japan's pledged funds for fiscal year 2004 was \$35 million. This is far from enough compared to Japan's economic scale and position. Japan has not pledged any funding towards the Global AIDS Fund for fiscal year 2005. I am appealing to you to assist Africa in its pledge to cope with a disease that threatens the entire continent. In the spirit of *Ubuntu*, Japan would be recognised as an exclusive partner for Africa in its fight against AIDS.

If you are still asking yourself why Japan or even Asia should care about AIDS, I'd further like to draw a few points to your attention. AIDS has not nor cannot be contained within the borders of any country or continent. Nor can any continent insulate itself from the disease; it has spread to every continent, including Asia. Most high-income countries like Japan, the United States, and Portugal are currently contending with concentrated HIV epidemics. In these high-income nations, HIV infection rates are reportedly aggregated among injecting drug users and gay circles. It was reported that 80 000 people became infected with HIV in high-income countries last year, totalling 1.6 million people now living with the virus in these countries. According to the UN, worldwide 3 million people died of AIDS last year.

In Japan, 621 people, most of them males, became infected in 2001. The virus is spreading rapidly amongst young people. Nearly 40% of new infections during that year in Japan were among people in their teens and twenties - a development that seems to match reports of increased rates of sexually transmitted infections among Japanese men (up 21% between 1998 and 2000) and women under 24 (up 14%). Among young Japanese, there is apparently a growing trend of casual sex with multiple partners (known as *sukusutomo* or 'sex friends'), and this, coupled with falling condom sales, suggest that

new patterns of HIV expansion could widen significantly. It is a problem that needs attention before it becomes out of control in Japan and worldwide.

What do we do from here? Simply put, additional money is needed to combat the epidemic in Africa. In April 2001, the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, called for action -what is now known as the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. When the Global Fund was started, the hope was that it would be an effective mechanism to attract and manage resources to deal with international health issues. In 2001, the UN Secretary General quoted that an estimated \$7-10 billion was required annually to tackle the epidemic in low- and middle-income countries worldwide. Unfortunately, the Global Fund has fallen short of this benchmark. Also, the administrative processing of the funds that have been raised, has been slow and has delayed the actual distribution of the money.

Here is what you can do to help: Urge the Japanese government to increase its pledge towards the Global Fund for AIDS for the 2005 fiscal year and thereafter. Remember, the scale of its funding should match its economic scale. There are also other critical avenues to utilize. Encourage the Japanese private sectors to contribute more capital for the fund. Mobilize civil societies of Japan, such as anti-war, human rights, environment, and so on. Africa needs help from developed countries regardless of industry or sector, so that its global neighbours don't suffer the way in which millions of its families, businesses and economies have.

This is a war we seek to fight with love, compassion, resources and financial means. But it's not just about money; we need economic and social resources. In order to implement prevention, care and treatment programmes, a country's health, education, communications and other infrastructures must be developed well enough to deliver these interventions. Skilled medics, removal of HIV-related stigma and discrimination, empowering women and poverty reduction are all other areas that require **your** support to help reverse the tide against of the epidemic. The youth of today have the energy, education and communication skills to assist with volunteering and campaigning. I am appealing to the Japanese youth to become involved and to make a difference.

Conclusion

Global partnerships with governments, youth organisations, the private sector, and civil society are required to make effective steps towards an AIDS-free generation. We all need each other. We are a global village that needs to acknowledge each other's economic, social and financial needs. Today's leaders will be judged tomorrow by how much they contributed towards the fight against a pandemic that has shaken the world more than any other war or revolution. As Nelson Mandela said 6 months ago, "HIV/AIDS has killed more than the sum total of both the 1st and 2nd World Wars. It is now a human rights issue." What are you doing about this human rights issue? Do you see the link between yourself and the child dying of AIDS in South Africa? This time carries with it special blessings. I believe that we, the leaders of the 21st century, will have to rely on our spiritual gifts -like the concept of *Ubuntu*- unlike any other generation preceding us. The spiritual gifts of inner peace, compassion, tolerance, and unconditional love that we have need to be unleashed to make this world a healthier, safer and peaceful place for all of us and for our children to live in. We need to make the efforts now so that years, decades, even centuries from now, our succeeding generations will be proud of the contributions that we made to the war against AIDS and the security of their future.

Let the spirit of *Ubuntu* live on!

Thank You.

