

Speech of Mr. Sangaré Abdourahmane, Minister of Foreign Affairs

Special Session of the General Assembly

HIV/AIDS

I wish from this rostrum, at this special session of the General Assembly, to perform the important duty of addressing the friendly salutations of the people of Côte d'Ivoire and its President, Mr. Laurent Gbagbo, to Mr. Harri Holkeri, President of the special session, and to Mr. Kofi Annan for their initiatives taken in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. Our greetings go also to all representatives here.

The twenty-sixth special session must bear in mind this thought of Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS: Time is not on our side. A more urgent and rigorous response is imperative.

Turning now to Côte d'Ivoire's experience in the struggle against HIV/AIDS, I would like to bring to the Assembly's attention the fact that the first case of HIV infection in Côte d'Ivoire was recorded in 1985. At that time, a working group was established in the National Institute of Public Health to collect data on the new disease. In 1987 a decision was taken to establish a central coordinating bureau. A short-term action plan was also put in place for the period 1987-1988. The coordinating bureau thereafter became a national programme, and a medium-term plan was experimented with.

The first "days of struggle" against the disease were held in the National Assembly in 1992. Through the testimony of persons living with HIV in Côte d'Ivoire, a face was put on the disease for the first time.

In 1995 the goals of the programme were expanded to encompass the fight against sexually transmitted diseases and tuberculosis. In the same year, the national programme became an executive secretariat.

In 1997, an international conference on AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases in Africa was held in Abidjan. An international solidarity fund for treatment was established, with an initial donation of approximately \$670,000. However, the prohibitive cost of antiretroviral drugs has not made it possible to treat many people with the disease.

Côte d'Ivoire is today a country with a high incidence of HIV. Over 10 per cent of the population is infected — more than 1 million persons out of a total population of 15 million. Forty-five per cent of persons with tuberculosis are HIV positive. The ratio of infection for men and women, which had been 4:1, is now 1:1. Approximately 600,000 children have been orphaned by AIDS, among whom some are also HIV positive. One teacher dies of AIDS every day.

The situation I have just described is dark and alarming. However, important progress has been made in the struggle against HIV/AIDS in Côte d'Ivoire. That progress includes the establishment of a national policy on sexually transmitted diseases, a reduction in mother-to-child infection, the establishment of an initiative to facilitate access to drugs, an improvement in people's knowledge and attitudes, the involvement of non-governmental organizations and civil society, the growing involvement of other ministries and the private sector and the establishment of decentralized structures to fight HIV/AIDS.

Moreover, on 24 January 2001 a ministry attached to the office of the Prime Minister was created to deal with the fight against AIDS and other epidemics, which illustrates the political will to place the struggle against HIV/AIDS high among our major priorities. The ministry, which is headed by a woman, has two main functions. The first is to plan, guide, coordinate, monitor and evaluate HIV/AIDS programmes while taking the gender perspective into account. Its second function is to mobilize human, financial and technical resources in all areas of activity throughout the country.

Among the social and cultural hurdles inhibiting the struggle against HIV/AIDS are levirate and sororate marriages, early sexual activity and marriage and sexual mutilation. External factors also constrain our efforts to eradicate the pandemic. The drop in our principal exports and the debt burden exacerbate the poverty of the population and impede the State from being able to devote greater resources to the fight against HIV/AIDS.

The fight against AIDS today is not just a medical struggle. It is a problem of society that is both behavioural and developmental in nature, and it threatens the survival of the human species. In the face of this scourge, which could make the death rate in Africa and Côte d'Ivoire higher than the birth rate, and given the urgency of the situation, I would like to appeal urgently to pharmaceutical companies and laboratories to make their drugs accessible to all sick persons; to the global scientific community and to financial consortiums and conglomerates to lend their technical and financial support to reduce the negative impact of HIV/AIDS on the development of our countries; to the political decision makers to have greater awareness of the pandemic, to deal with it more transparently and to make a renewed commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS; and to the entire international community to respond appropriately and exceptionally to the fight against HIV/AIDS.