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THE CALL OF THE TIMES: TOWARDS A CULTURE OF PREVENTION

Two Special Sessions of the United Nations General Assembly in 2001 have been dedicated to responding to urgent needs of our times: the UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS, held 25-27 June 2001, and the UN Special Session on Small Arms and Light Weapons, held 9-20 July 2001.

Both sessions called for urgent action: the former, to stop the spread of the pandemic disease of HIV/AIDS; the latter, to stop the globalization of illicit trade in small arms and light weapons. They presented a grim picture of the global situation caused by these fatal

killers. The number of people affected is very disheartening, and it is even more disheartening to recall that each and every number has a human face. While both showed that the whole global village is affected, it was clear in both that Africa demands the world's most urgent attention.

These sessions strongly emphasized the crucial importance of prevention. They definitely point to a new hope and promise in our effort to overcome these two fatal killers in and through global solidarity

"FROM A CULTURE OF REACTION TO A CULTURE OF PREVENTION"

This was the challenge posed by Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General in his annual report on the organization in 1999. The conclusion of his report summarized the importance of what he envisioned as "Facing the Humanitarian Challenge: Towards a Culture of Prevention".

Today no one disputes that prevention is better and cheaper than reacting to crises after the fact. And yet our political and organizational cultures and practices remain oriented far more towards reaction than prevention. In the words of the ancient proverb, it is difficult to find money for medicine, but easy to find it for a coffin. The transition from a culture of reaction to a culture of prevention will not be easy, but the difficulty of our task does not make it any less imperative. War and natural disasters remain the major threats to the security of individuals and

human communities worldwide. Our solemn duty to future generations is to reduce these threats. We know what needs to be done. What is now needed is the foresight and political will to do it."(UNDPI/2070-Sept 1999).

True to its name and mission, VIVAT International is strongly caught up in this call to take concrete actions to carry out its commitment to uphold and sustain LIFE. The cries of our brothers and sisters around us, but especially those of Africa, demand that we listen and care with compassion and immediacy.

**Our response TODAY
is our duty to future generations.**

GLOBAL CRISIS – GLOBAL ACTION

This was the theme of the UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS. The session aimed at mobilizing a greatly intensified global response to the AIDS epidemic and at galvanizing political commitment and leadership to tackle what nations have agreed constitutes a “global emergency.”

An overview of the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Since the first clinical evidence of AIDS was reported two decades ago, HIV/AIDS has spread to every corner of the world. Still rapidly growing, the epidemic is reversing development gains, robbing millions of their lives, widening the gap between rich and poor, and undermining social and economic security.

Since the epidemic began AIDS has killed a total of 21.8 million people and an estimated 36.1 million people are living with HIV. Sub-Saharan Africa is by far the worst affected region with 17 million already dead and an estimated 25.3 million living with HIV.

By killing so many people in the prime of their lives, AIDS poses a serious threat to development. It undermines efforts to reduce poverty and improve living standards.

With less access to jobs, health care and other services, impoverished people are more likely to resort to commercial sex and other survival strategies that put them at risk of contracting HIV, thus creating a vicious cycle.

Governments are losing valuable skilled employees and are confronted with mounting expenses for health and orphan care, reduced revenues and lower return on social investment.

In agriculture, HIV/AIDS is reducing investments in soil enhancement, irrigation and other capital improvements.

Households are shifting to crops that are less labor intensive, but also less nourishing. Teachers and students are dying or leaving school, reducing the quality and efficiency of educational systems.

Women and girls are more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The greatest burden of care also rests on their shoulders. Health care systems are overstretched as they deal with a growing number of AIDS patients and a loss of health care personnel.

In conflict situations, children and young people are especially vulnerable to AIDS. Those unable to escape conflict zones face high risks of sexual abuse, forced military recruitment and prostitution.

The use of rape as an instrument of war and repression adds another serious dimension.

SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

“Where there is war, conflict, or generalized fear and insecurity, little or no development is taking place. Fields lie fallow, factories lie idle, and business and investment evaporates. (UNDP’s Small Arms Reduction Programme, Questions and Answers)

Definition of terms

A **small arm (SA)** is one that can be fired, maintained and transported by one person.

A **light weapon (LW)** is used by a small crew and transported on a light vehicle or pack animal.

The Present Scenario

It is believed that SA and LW were the weapons of choice in 46 of 49 major conflicts since 1990. They have devastated many societies, caused incalculable human suffering and continue to pose an enormous humanitarian challenge.

500,000 people are killed every year by SA and LW (far more than the number who died in and as a result of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki). An estimated 50-60% of the world’s trade in SA is said to be legal, but legally exported weapons often find their way into illicit markets. More than 20% of Sub-Saharan Africa’s population was directly affected by civil wars in the 1990’s.

There are no actual armed conflicts in Brazil, but 300,000 people died of armed violence in the past decade, 30,000 each year on average.

More than 90% of victims of SA are women and children. 2 million children have been killed in conflicts in the last ten years, 6 million have been disabled and 22 million have been driven from their homes. Thousands of children are being forced to kill and are being killed in wars, serving the greed of the powerful.

Women and girls are specifically targeted by SA and are often forced to endure rape, violence, abductions, slavery and forced prostitution. Little girls are being kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery by men who know only the rule of the gun.

There are over 500 million weapons in circulation worldwide and more are being produced each day. So far, *there are no global laws to control the flow of weapons* to drug dealers, terrorists and areas of conflict.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST HIV/AIDS - SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS

The United Nations at work against AIDS.

The creation of a coherent and effective long-term campaign against the epidemic has been given new impetus by the Secretary-General's call to action against AIDS as well as the proposed global fund on AIDS and health.

The Secretary-General has set five priorities for action:

(1) *Preventing further spread of the epidemic*, especially by giving young people, those at greatest risk of infection, the knowledge and power to protect themselves through awareness campaigns, counseling and testing.

(2) *Reducing HIV transmission from mother to child.*

(3) *Ensuring that care and treatment is within reach of all.*

(4) *Promoting scientific breakthroughs*, giving priority budgets to finding both a cure for HIV/AIDS, and even more importantly, a vaccine against the disease.

(5) *Protecting those made most vulnerable by the pandemic, especially orphans*, providing help for the estimated 13 million children, most of them in Sub-Saharan Africa, who have lost their mothers or both parents to AIDS.

Global Targets and Timetables.

Targets set by the Special Session involve:

- improving education aimed particularly at ensuring that 15 to 24-year-olds have access to information and services needed to reduce their vulnerability,
- reducing the proportion of infants infected by HIV,
- developing national strategies to strengthen health care systems (including affordability and pricing), and
- developing national strategies to provide a supportive environment for orphans and children infected and affected by HIV/AIDS.

Governments have also agreed to reach, by 2005, an annual expenditure on the epidemic of between 7 – 10 billion dollars and to support the establishment of the Global Fund. (For further information: <www.unaids.org, www.un.org/ga/aids>)

The UN Conference on Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons

The draft program of action for the session contained proposals for measures to improve legislation, to establish national focal points, and deal with the management of stocks, destruction of surplus stocks, export controls, marking and tracing weapons, disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants, information and transparency issues, UN security Council embargoes and follow-up mechanisms. (See <www.un.org/Depts/dda/CAB/smallarms/confdoc.htm>)

Outcome of the Conference

Consensus was reached on a program of action to reduce the proliferation and misuse of SALWs and to achieve progress on such issues as the impact of guns, related health and humanitarian issues (particularly the needs of women and children), more effective post-conflict disarmament and demobilization programs, and recognition of the role of civil society.

No consensus was reached on a commitment to negotiate international treaties on arms brokering, on the marking and tracing of weapons, on reference to protecting human rights, nor on commitment of governments to engage NGOs as partners.

Certain government delegates and a handful of NGOs exerted pressure to weaken the earlier document, significantly limiting its scope. One developed country succeeded in blocking two important issues that would have made a world of difference, namely controls over private ownership of these guns and the need for preventing sales of such arms to non-state groups.

VIVAT International's Contribution

A joint statement of Franciscans International and VIVAT International viewed the issue of SALWs in the larger context of development. The statement urged the surrender, seizure, and destruction of illicit and excessive SALWs. It included a proposal to link programs for the surrender of arms to capacity building, education and job opportunities. (<www.vivatinternational.org/small_arms.htm>)

**NOW is the TIME, THIS is the MOMENT.
VIVAT INTERNATIONAL CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE!**

A. In the fight against HIV/AIDS.

Represented by Sr. Carmen Castro, VIVAT International joined other New York faith-based organizations in October 2000 to form AFRUS/AIDS. Initial efforts consisted in contacting partners among the grassroots women in Africa. The UN world conferences on Women, HABITAT II, and the Special Session on AIDS provided the venues for initial dialogue, planning and collaboration which ushered in the formulation of the mission statement of AFRUS/AIDS:

"The Africa/US Women's Partnership to Stop HIV/AIDS Pandemic represents a broad coalition of grassroots and faith-based organizations who seek to partner with African women on the ground to address together the pandemic of AIDS in Africa".

(For further information, contact: AFRUS-AIDS@egroups.com).

Committed to promote life, we are called to make a collective effort to reach out to AFRICA as a priority. SVD-SSpS provinces and regions in countries that are less affected with HIV/AIDS can extend support to Africa, primarily in the African countries in which we are already present: Angola, Benin, Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Mozambique, Togo, Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe.

We need to network with others, sharing resources, best practices and success stories, to initiate and organize advocacy, on the local, national and international levels bearing

in mind the agreements reached and the targets agreed upon the Special Session on HIV/AIDS.

We should focus on the most vulnerable groups and continue exploring and experimenting with creative and holistic approaches, community-based strategies and sustained presence.

20 years have passed since the first outbreak of HIV/AIDS. It might take as much time, patience and determination to carry on the mission: VIVAT! LET LIVE!

B. In Stopping SALWs

In order that the momentum created during the Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons may be maintained and intensified, NGOs will have to monitor the adherence to and progress made in the program of action by the government in every country.

Aware that continued availability of weapons, especially in post-conflict situations, not only undermines a country's ability to sustain peace, but also poses a major block to sustainable human development, members of VIVAT International are called on to take part in the process mentioned above by networking with NGOs working in their country/region in the area of SALWs.

Reducing the negative impact on child-soldiers will have to be given special attention, especially in countries affected by war and conflict.

Members are invited to share their success stories in this area with VIVAT International, New York, so that they could be taken to appropriate forums.

VIVAT International, having poverty eradication and women as its main issues of focus and working towards peace and sustainable development in the world, will do well by taking initiatives in the struggle towards the elimination of SAs that contribute to the acceleration of conflicts, war and destruction. (Full report: <www.vivatinternational.org/small_arms.htm>)

Special thanks to the contributors on Poverty and Poverty Eradication.

We are still open to more contributions from "on the ground" before we attempt to finalize our statement.

WE ALSO THANK ALL WHO HAVE COMMUNICATED WITH US BETWEEN JUNE AND AUGUST