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Landmark Speech by President Zuma

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Yesterday, President Jacob Zuma made one of the most important speeches in the history of AIDS in South Africa. In front of the National Council of Provinces (NCOP), he unequivocally acknowledged the devastation of AIDS on our country. With this speech state-supported AIDS denialism has been banished. The Treatment Action Campaign welcomes the ushering in of this new era, almost exactly ten years since former President Mbeki made a speech that began the era of state-supported denial in front of the NCOP.

President Zuma acknowledged that government?s efforts so far have been insufficient to curb the devastation of the epidemic. The reality of this has been declining health outcomes and increasing mortality. We have a crippled health system and a ballooning epidemic from the years of AIDS denialism and inaction by former President Thabo Mbeki and former Health Minister Manto Tshablala-Msimang. However, today?s speech puts that behind us and provides hope that President Zuma will urgently tackle the epidemic with renewed commitment to meet the treatment and prevention targets of the HIV & AIDS and STIs National Strategic Plan 2007-2011 (NSP).

In his speech, President Zuma acknowledged that the fear and shame that have surrounded the epidemic must be overcome. The spread of the epidemic is intimately connected to government?s ability to safeguard our human rights. All South Africans must feel secure to know their status and access and adhere to treatment without fear of discrimination.

President Zuma emphasized the need for behaviour change to reduce new infections by 50% from 2007 to 2011, the NSP prevention target. Changing behaviour must be facilitated by increased access to prevention services and by reducing the vulnerabilities to HIV infection in our society. Converting knowledge to behaviour change will be directly linked to these interventions.

A theme of the speech was that to turn the tide of the epidemic political will is needed not only by government but also by the citizens of South Africa. TAC and other civil societies have developed an active cadre of HIV activists in South Africa but this commitment to tackling the epidemic needs to be adopted throughout our society. As South African citizens we must actively engage with our own health and the health of each other. As active citizens we can overcome the stigma and discrimination that have driven the epidemic.

Key challenges remain to meeting the ambitious targets of the National Strategic Plan (2007 - 2011) for the treatment and prevention of HIV. But with the renewed political will demonstrated by President Zuma demonstrated by President Zuma and the leadership of Minister of Health, Aaron Motsoaledi, we believe these targets are achievable.

- AIDS Denialism

- HIV/AIDS National Strategic Plan

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