



Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka
Deputy-President
Republic of South Africa
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By registered mail and fax: (012) 323 3114

Dear Deputy-President Mlambo-Ngcuka

OPEN LETTER: COMMITMENT TO NATIONAL STRATEGIC PLAN

Today we once again live in fear that government is in retreat. The dismissal of Nozizwe Madlala Routledge and the manner in which she was dismissed has increased this fear. We fear that denialism about the scale and needs of the HIV crisis as well as the crisis in the public health system more broadly is once again ascendant in the health ministry.

Until now, out of respect for you and the Cabinet's endorsement of the National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections 2007-2011 (NSP) we have remained silent on the obstructions from the Health Ministry. We hoped that government would put the lives of our people before misplaced loyalty. Instead, our people continue to die and become infected because of lack of leadership and deliberate obstruction from Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang and her Director-General, Thami Mseleku.

At our meetings in late 2006 we understood that you committed government to:

1. The introduction of a policy to provide dual antiretroviral prophylaxis for the prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission. The Health Minister has ignored the recommendation in the NSP in this regard, even though the MCC and MRC have also recommended this intervention which is in line with WHO Guidelines since 2004. This intervention is feasible, affordable and being called for by health professionals.
2. Negotiate an agreement on the Westville Prison case and a plan for prisons across the country. After agreement was reached with Deputy-Minister Loretta Jacobus and her team, mysteriously, Minister Ngconde Balfour and the Director-general of Health blocked this agreement. It remains stalled. Prisoners in Westville and most other prisons continue to die in large numbers.
3. Settle TAC's court action against government in the case of the notorious vitamin salesman Matthias Rath. The Health Ministry blatantly ignored your recommendation and this case is now provisionally set down for late 2007.

These are a few of many examples of the deliberate undermining by the Health Ministry of our commitments to unity and urgency. We ask that you lead us.

The NSP commits, by the end of 2007, to:

- place an additional 120,000 adults on antiretroviral treatment,
- place an additional 17,000 children on antiretroviral treatment,
- offer and recommend HIV testing to 70% of pregnant women,
- provide 25,000 pregnant women with a comprehensive package of AIDS care including antiretroviral treatment,
- increase the proportion of the estimated population of HIV-infected pregnant women in need who receive mother-to-child transmission prevention services by 60%, and

- use PCR tests to determine the status of 45% of infants born to HIV-positive women before they are six months old.

The NSP also commits to improved drug regimens, the introduction of a new policy on HIV testing, appropriate policies on male medical circumcision and much else.

Over 300,000 people in South Africa died of AIDS in 2006 and over half-a-million people need AIDS treatment now or they will die within the next two years. Tens of thousands of infants will be infected with HIV this year. These are grim statistics, but government can save many lives by implementing the NSP. In late 2006, you gave us immense hope. A bridge had opened up uniting government with scientists, people living with HIV, clinicians, unions, churches, business, broader civil society and the TAC.

We call on you to restore our confidence in government's commitment to the NSP by

1. reducing infant mortality by placing more children on treatment, scaling up the mother-to-child transmission prevention programme, introducing dual-antiretroviral prophylaxis in all provinces and offering highly active antiretroviral treatment to women attending antenatal clinics with CD4 counts close to or below 200;
2. improving the antiretroviral treatment programme by decentralising the accreditation process to provinces, revising the HIV treatment guidelines to include newer drugs and pressurising pharmaceutical companies to allow cheaper generic antiretrovirals to enter the market, particularly efavirenz and lopinavir/ritonavir;
3. providing a comprehensive package of HIV care, treatment and prevention to all prisons;
4. identifying health facilities across the country with human resource shortages and taking steps to provide them with staff;
5. making an honest appraisal of the enormity of the crisis in our health services;
6. restoring respect for the Medicines Act by stopping charlatans, like Matthias Rath, who promote untested medicines; and
7. measuring accurately the key outputs of the NSP so that the implementation of the plan can be evaluated.

We ask you to do this in order to fulfil the constitutional rights to life, dignity and access to health-care services, but most importantly, to save and improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people.

While we appreciate that there is a SANAC Plenary meeting on 10 September, we believe the gravity of this issue justifies raising it now and in a public manner. We have all invested a great deal of time and hope in the NSP and its targets. Millions of lives literally depend upon our commitment to work together to resolve these issues.

Yours sincerely

Eddie Makue, General Secretary, South African Council of Churches

Dolos Luka, President, South African NGO Coalition

Denise Hunt, Executive Director, AIDS Consortium (representing over 1,000 affiliates, NGOs, CBOs and individuals committed to HIV work)

Vanessa Ludwig, Director, Triangle Project

Vuyiseka Dubula, PWA Sector Co-ordinator, Treatment Action Campaign

Zwelinzima Vavi, General Secretary, Congress of South African Trade Unions