

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**ADDRESS BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE THEO-BEN GURIRAB, MP,
PRIME MINISTER OF THE REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA AT THE OCASSION OF
THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW START HIV/AIDS VOLUNTARY
TESTING CENTRE**

KATUTURA

4 FEBRUARY 2004

**DIRECTOR OF CEREMONIES,
MANAGEMENT AND STAFF OF THE SOCIAL MARKETING ASSOCIATION
(SMA),
PRIVATE SECTOR PARTNERS,
DIPLOMATIC CORPS,
MEMBERS OF THE MEDICAL FRATERNITY,
MEDIA PRACTITIONERS,
DISTINGUISHED GUESTS,
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,**

I feel very encouraged to be here today to witness the launching of this important initiative in our common fight to contain and defeat HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Faced with the enormity of the disaster and the inability of medical science to come up with cure, prevention is the best weapon to confront this pandemic. Education has a vital role to play in prevention not only as a means of passing information but also as a means of changing attitudes and behaviour about this terrible disease, both as a health problem, security threat and development challenge.

The impact and spread of the disease is directly affecting all our communities. And it is only through a strengthened and collective response that we can stop the spread of HIV infection, provide care to those infected and affected and eliminate the shameful stigma associated with AIDS.

The more we as partners join various initiatives, the better it would be for us to deal with many complex and related issues that surround HIV/AIDS.

Between them the Ministries of Health and Social Services and of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare are driving with dedication Government's policy of HIV/AIDS, with special attention being paid to the plight of AIDS orphans and expecting mothers. Regrettably, global funding is more by way of pledges than on actual delivery. NABCOA has become a true partner.

On this occasion, I would like to commend and give thanks to the Social Marketing Association (SMA) and its co-workers for responding to the challenge of HIV/AIDS in our country. I am particularly glad that you have chosen to launch this Voluntary Testing Centres and in so doing send a clear message that we all have a responsibility to bring comfort and provide solutions to our social problems and save lives.

Our responsibility as partners is to ensure that correct information is disseminated to all Namibians to enable them to make right choices and create a safe and nurturing environment for speaking about sexuality and other societal issues that impact on our lives. We must win this fight.

Today, you are demonstrating that in spite of all the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS, there is hope. I am proud of the way Namibians and our cooperating partners are actively responding to this national struggle. Out of this timely collaboration to promote prevention campaigns, many are serving the society as volunteers helping and supporting those who are infected and affected.

Namibia has the fifth highest HIV infection rate in sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 23% of adults in Namibia are living with HIV/AIDS. Recent statistics from our Ministry of Health and Social Services indicate that HIV infection continues to spread. True, some of the others are worst off, but no beauty contest here. All of us face Damocles, ominous sword. We have no choice but to help one another. Black plague killed millions of people centuries ago in Europe. It was surrounded, like AIDS today, but antics of superstition, phobia and stigmatisation. Human nature is often rotten.

Surveys happily also show that about 90% of Namibians have the correct information about HIV. Despite this high level of public awareness and combating of the disease, sustained behaviour and attitudes change have unfortunately not been achieved yet.

I am told that SMA, an affiliate of Population Services International, opened its doors in Windhoek in October 1996. Less than a year later, SMA began implementing a condom communal marketing project, funded by the German development agency, GTZ, in the Caprivi and Kavango regions. The Association has since been involved in malaria early warning initiatives and AIDS prevention campaigns with the Namibia Defence Force. February last year, the Association opened its first three of six New Start Voluntary Testing and Counselling Centres with support from the European Community and the United States Government. I

congratulate you all for your dedication and generosity in helping us fight the scourge of HIV/AIDS.

The New Start Voluntary Testing and Counselling Centres are fully equipped with well-trained and dedicated councillors. The Centres, I am told, offer Namibians a hassle-free, friendly, professional and affordable service for what can at times be a nerve-wrecking experience.

I understand that counselling is provided regardless of whether a person tests negative or positive for the virus. I applaud this approach because it helps educate our people on how to prevent contracting the dreaded disease. As in many other aspects of life, education is crucial and dealing with HIV/AIDS is no exception. Knowledge saves lives.

I recently learnt through the media that the New Start Centre in Katima Mulilo has been severely under-utilised. I would, therefore, like to urge our fellow citizens particularly those in the Caprivi region and others all across Namibia to make use of these New Start Centres and to get to know their HIV status. By knowing their HIV status, our people can plan for the future both for prevention and treatment.

I know for a fact that centres of this nature have had a positive impact on attitudes and behaviour change. This has been demonstrated in countries like Uganda, Senegal, Rwanda, Tanzania and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond. I also know that we can make a difference and that together we can conquer this enemy.

It is now my distinct honour and privilege to declare this New Start HIV/AIDS Voluntary Testing Centre officially open. Keep hope alive!

I thank you