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HIV – AIDS AT THE CENTER OF DISCUSSIONS OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN FIRST LADIES (OAFLA)

Addis Ababa, 30th January 2012 – The Organization of African First Ladies Against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA) held its General Assembly, today 30 January 2012, at the African Union headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, under the theme: *“An HIV/AIDS free tomorrow needs caring men and women today”*.



The OAFLA General Assembly was chaired by Advocate Bience Gawanas, Commissioner for Social Affairs of the African Union.

The First Lady of Ethiopia, Mrs Azeb Mesfin was the first to address the audience in her capacity of hostess and former President of OAFLA. She stated that her three years as president of OAFLA gave her a lot of pride, OAFLA being a real step up for the role

of First Ladies. According to First Lady Mesfin, the association not only fights against



AIDS but also promotes values such as peace, good governance and women empowerment. She explained that, First Ladies have the capacity to influence change through their collective voices, “they have become the voice of the most vulnerable”, she noted. Mrs. Mesfin underlined the necessity to empower women, as empowerment is the key to protect them from HIV/AIDS.

Mrs Penehupifo Pohamba, First Lady of the Republic of Namibia and President of the OAFLA welcomed newcomers. They are: the First Ladies of Cape Verde, Comoros, Southern Sudan, and Zambia. She commended the establishment of a permanent Secretariat for the association in 2009 in Addis Ababa Ethiopia and the record attendance during a meeting of the technical advisers which took place last week in Addis Ababa. The meeting grouped 21 advisers sent by the First Ladies. The President of OAFLA then summarized the main achievements during her mandate including: the reduction of Mother to Child Transmission, the promotion of effective communication, advocacy, networking and mobilization of resources and the revitalization of the OAFLA membership. When concluding her speech, she recalled the importance of having an inclusive, comprehensive and flexible agenda in order to include other issues such as Tuberculosis, Malaria, gender-based violence and poverty. “OAFLA can no longer only be about HIV/AIDS”, she said.

Mrs Ban Soon-Taek, wife of the United Nations Secretary General, was the guest of honor at the AOFLA General Assembly. In her speech, Mrs. Ban stated that, the momentum is building and the support for this project is increasing, therefore an AIDS free generation can be reality in a few years. She said saving the lives of children and their mothers is the main goal. “The improvement of reproductive health services” she said, was also a means to decrease vulnerability factors while highlighting the advantages of couple oriented solutions and the need to have high profile champions in all countries to lead the process in the sensitization campaign.

Addressing the African First Ladies, Commissioner Gawanas underlined men involvement in the fight against AIDS. She said men are often blamed and left out when they also have sexual and reproductive health needs that have to be addressed. She recalled the campaign against HIV-AIDS and the effort of the Department of Social Affairs of the African Union to eradicate mother to child transmission to zero.

Mr. Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, on his part, assured the OAFLA members of his support. He congratulated the First Ladies for their efforts aimed at bringing a change in the way people perceived the pandemic and how this has improved the lives of many. He underscored the importance for African countries to look for its own source of financing. “We are now going through a “Make it or Break it” phase and we need to find ways to produce our own drugs and look into ways to transfer technologies”, he reiterated.

Other key speakers at the General Assembly of OAFLA include: the UNFPA Country Representative and Representative to AU and ECA, Mr. Benoît Kalasa, RAND Cooperation Representative with OAFLA Dr. Gery Ryan and African AIDS Vaccine Partnership Executive Director Dr. Chidi Victor Nweneka.

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