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**WELCOME SPEECH BY THE DIRECTOR, AFRICAN UNION
MEDICAL AND HEALTH SERVICES ON THE OCCASION OF
WORLD AIDS DAY 2019.**

**THEME: “*Preventing AIDS among Refugees, Returnees
and Internally Displaced Persons: African Communities
at the fore front*”.**

Addis Ababa, 6th December 2019.

Excellences,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning and welcome. As you may have noticed, the Director, MHSD is unavoidably absent due to some other urgent issues. He sends special greetings and has delegated me to welcome you all most sincerely and thank you for accepting our invitation to this year's World AIDS Day commemoration.

WAD is usually commemorated on 1st December each year. However, when this date falls on a weekend or holiday, we still commemorate it on the earliest possible date. This year, 1st December was on a Sunday hence the organizing committee led by no other than Dr Wafa Debbabi decided to move it to today. I think the essence, importance or significance of the day should not be lost in whether it was done on first or 6th of December. Therefore today, the African Union Commission joins the World to reaffirm its commitment to fight against and end HIV/AIDS in Africa and the World.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and gentlemen,

This year marks the 21st World AIDS Day since 1988 when James W. Bunn and Thomas Netter—two public health officers co-founded the day at the WHO's Global Program on AIDS in Geneva— this was in an effort to destigmatize the disease.

In those days people were being fired from their job. They were being denied Social Security benefits. They were being ostracized by their

families. They were being evicted from their homes because they were sick and dying. But today we know better and thus we proudly show our support for people living with HIV and AIDS by wearing a red ribbon.

Now, World AIDS Day is commemorated to show support for people living with HIV (PLWHAs) and to pay tribute to those who have died. It is also a day to take stock and review the progress made so far in combating HIV/AIDS, celebrate the successes and remember what remains to be done.

World AIDS Day is thus important as it serves to remind all stakeholders that HIV has not yet gone away and the need to keep our promises and commitments.

For each year, the commemoration is centred around a global theme proposed by the UN agency charged with the responsibility of an accelerated, comprehensive and coordinated global action on the HIV/AIDS pandemic (UNAIDS). The global theme this year is

For the African Union, the theme is usually selected bearing in mind the global theme but aligning it to the AU Summit theme for the year. It is a rigorous process of calling for proposals, screening for the best three, debate on the shortlisted themes and voting for the best.

This year, our AU Summit theme is: **“Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards durable Solutions to Forced Displacement in Africa”** and the theme for the WAD commemoration is ***“Preventing AIDS among Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: African Communities***

at the fore front” There is no doubt that there is a growing Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons problem both globally and in Africa. The theme is therefore aimed at drawing attention to this growing problem and how easily HIV care services to these special group can very easily slip through the cracks as the health services providers are being overwhelmed by other acute diseases, financial constraints and even physical or security threats. Intentional, directed actions are required to ensure that HIV Prevention, Treatment and care services are available and accessible to them.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Since the start of the epidemic 75 million people have become infected with HIV and about 32.0 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses, making HIV/AIDS one of the worst pandemics in history.

In 2018, about 37.9 million people were living with HIV globally. About 2/3rd of these people live in Sub-Saharan Africa. The ambitious 90-90-90 treatment target by 2020 was proposed to help set the trajectory to end HIV as an epidemic by 2020. Now we are a few days to 2020 and yet to reach the targets. In 2018, only 79% of all PLWHAs knew their status, 62 % were receiving sustained antiretroviral therapy and 53% had their viral load suppressed. Western and Central Africa are clearly lagging behind in all the parameters in Africa. While 67% of all people living with HIV in Eastern and Southern Africa are receiving antiretroviral therapy, only 51% in Western and Central Africa are. Young women and girls continue to remain vulnerable. In sub-Saharan Africa, four in five new infections among adolescents aged 15–19 years are in girls. Young women aged 15–24 years are twice as likely to be living with HIV than men.

Current UNAIDS data shows that the rate of new HIV is declining, AIDS-related deaths have fallen and HIV financing has improved. At the end of 2018, US\$ 19.0 billion was available for the AIDS response in low- and middle-income countries compared to US\$ 15.9 in 2010. Domestic resources constituted 56% of the total resources for HIV in low- and middle income countries in 2018.

In spite of all the progress made in the AIDS response, a lot of work still needs to be done to achieve the SDG 3 of ending AIDS as a public health threat. More people should know their status, be under treatment and be virally suppressed. Stigma and discrimination or its fear, which is still a reality for many people living with HIV should be addressed and more resources should be mobilised in order to make AIDS a thing of the past. UNAIDS however estimates that US\$ 26.2 billion will be required for the AIDS response in 2020 in low- and middle-income countries and US\$ 23.9 billion required in 2030.

Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This week various MHSD teams have:

- Prepared and distributed over 2,000 red ribbons
-Flyers, brochures and banners.
- Performed Free Voluntary Confidential Counselling and Testing for over.....clients
- Demonstrated and distributed over male and female protective gears
- Various Communication activities and here we are today again

Through these activities, we have been raising awareness about HIV/AIDS to the AUC and AU- African Embassy Communities in Addis

Ababa. We have stressed the need for Prevention of new HIV infections including Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and stop HIV stigma and discrimination and show support and solidarity for colleagues that are infected or affected.

We have advocated for high level political will, support, ownership and leadership for the AU HIV Workplace program. And for the first time, the Chairperson of the African Union has made a statement on the World AIDS Day. We have also promoted and popularized our AU HIV/AIDS Workplace Policy among staff.

Even after the commemoration, we will like to see renewed openness and continued discussions on HIV/ AIDS within the AU community. We look forward to an increase in the uptake of Voluntary Confidential Counselling and Testing and have at least 90% of the AU community know their status. And achieve the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets as an example for African Member States to emulate.

I thank you Excellencies, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen for coming and for your attention.