

PRESS RELEASE

“SAVE OUR CHILDREN FROM AIDS – HEALTH MINISTER URGES AS GUYANA LAUNCHES GLOBAL CAMPAIGN ON CHILDREN AND AIDS

Minister of Health, Dr. Leslie Ramsammy last Thursday, May 4th, appealed to agencies and corporations, activists and scientists, community workers, families, young people and children to join the many Guyanese who are already working towards an AIDS-free generation when, “not one more child will die from AIDS, not one more child will be infected with HIV, not one more child will lose a parent or teacher or friend to a pandemic that must be stopped.” The Minister’s call came at the launching of the UNITE FOR CHILDREN, UNITE AGAINST AIDS campaign, led by the Ministry of Health, together with the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security.

Delivering the feature address at the launch ceremony, the Health Minister said every minute that passes, another child under 15 dies of an AIDS related illness and another four between the ages of 15 to 24 become infected. This simply does not have to be, it is unacceptable, Dr. Ramsammy explained “we have a battle on our hands....we must make a commitment. Guyana is making a valiant fight, we can make a difference and realize the AIDS free generation.” Continuing he said, “we in Guyana are fortunate to offer women medicine to ensure their babies are born in good health without having HIV/AIDS. Everyone has an opportunity to learn more about HIV/AIDS, to get counseling and tested and it is all free. Lets maximize these opportunities, let us Unite for Children and Unite Against AIDS”.

Speaking on behalf of UNICEF, Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean Mr. Nils Kastberg, urged Guyanese to make sure that they take the services provided seriously, “we must make sure that every mother that becomes pregnant will be tested to determine if she has or hasn’t gotten the HIV, and if she has, she will get the support she needs, and so when the baby is born, we make certain he /she doesn’t get the virus.” He also noted that some other countries have not yet provided these services for children and getting treatment is difficult, so Guyana is well poised to meet deadlines for reversing the spread of the disease by 2015.

The campaign was launched in Guyana with a mini exhibition which featured booths by various sports organizations and UN agencies. Interactive sessions and mini matches with the national cricket and football teams were aimed at showcasing sports and the arts as healthy lifestyles options for young people. Also as part of the launch ceremony, children and young people delivered messages in song and drama. The theme song for the local campaign, “**Don’t give it to the Children**”, was composed and performed live by local entertainer Courtney Noel, whose rendition brought the audience of more than 400 to their feet, chanting “Unite for Children, Unite Against AIDS”. The programme was chaired by two children from the Schools Health Club and was witnessed by more than 350 schools children from all of Guyana’s 10 regions, a cross section of public and private sector officials, including Minister of Labour, Human Services and Social Security Bibi Shaddick.

BACKGROUND:

HIV/AIDS has been the focus of international concern for more than two decades. Yet, its impact on children has been given little consideration. In fact, the number of children affected were not even counted until recently as one of the first global estimates of children who had lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS appeared in 1997.

In recognition of the urgency of the epidemic's impact on children and families, the Global campaign on Children and AIDS has been designed to bring about a shift in the understanding of and the response of this epidemic, making children more visible.

UNITE FOR CHILDREN, UNITE AGAINST AIDS is an awareness building partnership and fundraising campaign, which was launched globally in November 2005. In Guyana, with support from UNICEF the Ministry of Health, together with the Ministry of Labour, Human Services and Social Security have come together to look at national programmes around the campaign's four pivot points in the light of achieving its mission. These points are, Prevention of transmission among young people, Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission, Paediatric Treatment and finally the Protection of orphans and other vulnerable children – all areas reflected in the Government of Guyana's AIDS response.

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