

## PRESS RELEASE

### Successful “Walk the Nation” Crosses the Finish Line

*Sicunusa, 13 March, 2008* Twelve days after they began, Swazis from 16 to 63 years old, crossed the finish line of the first-ever HIV awareness walk across the nation.

The Prime Minister kicked off the “Walk the Nation” campaign on 2 March 2008, and Minister of Regional Development and Youth Affairs Chief Siphon Shongwe stood in for the PM to close the Walk, extinguishing the torch that had been passed from community to community along the walk route.

“I congratulate all those who participated in this long walk,” said Minister Shongwe. “Today is not the end of this mission. We now have the leverage to continue and to use the educational messages about HIV that were disseminated by this campaign.”

Sixty-one male and 33 female Swazis participated as “nation walkers”, marching the entire 200kms from the Swazi border with Mozambique to the border with South Africa. The nation's youth lead the way, making up 85% of nation walkers. These youth represented Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, Red Cross peer educators and youth associations from across the country. But many young people came on their own, as individuals concerned that their country has the highest HIV prevalence in the world.

“I feel very sad that Swaziland is known for such a bad thing,” said Wandile Hlophe, at 16 years old, the youngest nation walker. “But I believe this march will make a big difference.”

As walkers snaked their way across the nation, they stopped in communities along the way to educate and entertain and to change attitudes about HIV. Nearly 7,000 people participated in these educational events and drew more than 1,680 people to join the campaign for at least part of its 200 kms.

Those who walked the entire length of Swaziland, from east to west, received medals of achievement from Minister Shongwe. All nation walkers also received food hampers with 5 kgs each of maize meal, samp and flour. Among those that walked the nation was an African American woman who hails from Fort Worth, Texas, a sister city to Swaziland's capital, Mbabane. Judith Dillard, 53, has been HIV positive for 18 years. She journeyed to Swaziland to participate in the walk and spread the message that life continues after HIV.

“Being HIV positive doesn't determine our worth,” said Judith. “Being positive, we can still love ourselves, our families and our communities. I encourage everyone to get tested. Knowing your status is the only way to end this epidemic.”

The Walk featured mobile HIV testing along the route, and 158 people tested during the campaign. Despite lasting for 12 days, the energy and enthusiasm of both walkers and participating communities never waned.

“I have gained so many things from this walk,” said a 19-year-old male walker. “But most importantly, I met people of different ages, from different places and with different HIV status. They are all my friends now. I'm going to go home and preach the gospel of preventing HIV to everyone I know.”