

'Mass Murder By Complacency'

Discussing the Group of Seven countries' response to the AIDS pandemic, UNAIDS envoy to Africa Stephen Lewis insisted that "those who watch the pandemic unfold with a kind of pathological equanimity must be held to account. There may yet come a day when we have peacetime tribunals to deal with this particular version of crimes against humanity."

Speaking to a press briefing at UN headquarters on Jan. 8, Lewis reported that at every stop of his four-country visit in December to Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia, he had been struck by the determination with which the African people and their governments were prepared to do battle against the plague. "I am weary to the point of exasperated impatience, at the endless expressions of doubt about Africa's resolve and Africa's intentions and Africa's capacities. Africans are engaged in endless numbers of initiatives and projects and programs and models which, if taken to scale, if generalized throughout the continent, would halt the pandemic."

He cited, in particular, Zimbabwe—which, "whatever the level of political turbulence, has created a sturdy municipal infrastructure for the purpose of dealing with

AIDS." In Malawi, the government is going to treat free of charge, and deliver anti-retroviral medication through the public health sector to 50,000 people.

Explaining that hunger and AIDS "have come together in a Hecate's brew of horror," Lewis spoke about a visit to the pediatric ward of the University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka, Zambia. "The infants were clustered, stick-thin, three and four to a bed, most so weakened by hunger and ravaged by AIDS that they really had no chance. We were there for 45 minutes; every 15 minutes, another child died, awkwardly covered with a sheet, then removed by a nurse, while the ward was filled with the anguishing weeping of the mothers. A scene from Hell." About the AIDS orphans, he noted that this is a new phenomenon for which the world has no evident solution. "Public health has confronted terrible contagions of communicable disease at other moments in human history. One day the same will be true for AIDS. But we've never before confronted the selective destruction of parents that leaves such a mass of orphans behind." Lewis noted that there is no way to deal with this. "They wander the streets as orphan gangs, bewildered, lonely, disenfranchised from all reality."

Lewis forecast the UN Global Fund for AIDS, launched by Secretary General Kofi Annan in mid-2001, will be in financial crisis after January 2003. And, "If there is a war in Iraq come February, then the war will eclipse every other international human priority, HIV/AIDS included."