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REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Dr. Joe Phaahla
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Statement by the Minister of Health of the Republic of South Africa

Hon. Dr. Joe Phaahla

Hosting of the 21st ICASA Conference 2021

On behalf of the Government of South Africa, we commit to do our utmost best to successfully host the 21st edition of the International Conference on AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA), scheduled to take place at Durban International Convention Centre and online 6–11 December 2021.

We thank the Society for AIDS in Africa (SAA) for their confidence in our ability to host the conference for the second time, barely a decade after having hosted the 17th ICASA conference in 2013, in the “Mother City” (Cape Town) under the theme, *Now More Than Ever, Targeting Zero!*

We also applaud the SAA for being resolute in ensuring that the HIV response agenda is not relegated to the periphery as the continent and the rest of the globe intensify efforts to arrest the COVID-19 pandemic.

ICASA is driving an integration agenda for COVID-19, HIV, TB and STIs services to ensure a comprehensive and inclusive health response for the continent. The South African Government supports this agenda and vision.

As a continent, we have come a long way over the last couple of decades – the ICASA platform will afford us an opportunity to assess our progress and share good practices to enhance our response.

In the past two years, COVID-19 has significantly derailed our efforts, with some reports painting a bleak picture of the impact of the pandemic on HIV and TB services. The latest UNAIDS Global AIDS Update, *Confronting Inequalities*, highlights the fact that only 19 countries achieved the 90-90-90 targets by 2020. Most others were already struggling to reach their targets, and that was exacerbated by the disruptions of COVID-19. The *Goalkeepers Report* by the Gates Foundation says the global health response has been set back by a whopping 25 years and estimates that lockdowns could increase global TB incidence by 6.3 million people and mortality by 1.5 million. Further to that, the TB response could be set back by as much as 5–8 years.

There are glaring signs in our own country that reinforce the scale of these challenges; within the first few months of the lockdown, data from health facilities pointed to a decline in the number of people accessing HIV and TB services. Many patients also missed their treatment collection appointments, and a sizeable number of people were lost to follow-up. These challenges were not just limited to HIV and TB, as there are also concerns over the



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number of people accessing services for immunisation and non-communicable diseases, and to access broader health and social services.

There's clearly a need to intensify our integration agenda and catch-up plans to mitigate against these setbacks and renew our determination. South Africa, together with many other countries, met at the UN General Assembly in June this year, and committed to a series of new and ambitious targets in the 2021 Political Declaration on AIDS. We agreed on the need to end AIDS by 2030, through an unflinching focus on ending inequalities.

We have a new global AIDS strategy 2021-2026 that provides us with clear objectives, updated areas of emphasis and new ways of working. It reflects the need for political leadership and scientific innovation, while clearly placing communities, key populations and people living with HIV especially, at the centre of our approach.

As we all continue to respond to the challenges of COVID-19, we must rebuild with the deliberate intent of addressing the inequalities that put us all at risk. These inequalities are apparent in our countries, across our region and continent, and internationally, as evidenced in the very unequal distribution of Coronavirus vaccines globally.

As countries, we can rebuild our economies and our health programmes by drawing on lessons learned from the HIV response over the last few decades. We should ground our approaches on human rights principles and drive a truly multisectoral response that is both inclusive and community centred. We should strengthen our health systems by mobilising alliances and reinforcing coalitions.

The face of HIV is still overwhelmingly that of a black female, particularly girls and young women in Sub-Saharan Africa who continue to experience new HIV infections at an alarming rate. I look forward to ICASA 2021 focusing on addressing the social and structural drivers of HIV and shining a spotlight on gender inequality and social protection for key populations and vulnerable people.

The conference should also reflect on concrete measures to support women and girls in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ways to arrest gender-based violence and improve access to essential health services should be explored. Governments across Africa need to do much more to empower women and girls. Education, socio-economic opportunities and safety for women and girls should remain as overarching objectives in our response to HIV.

We call on all African states to rally behind ICASA and participate in the 21st ICASA Conference to be hosted by our country later in the year and, to adopt the integration agenda in order to propel the African continent towards ending AIDS by the year 2030. Hosting this conference will have a deep and long-lasting impact on our HIV, TB and STIs response in South Africa while benefiting the entire continent.