

# Esther Mbayo Mbulakubuza, Minister

## Embrace President's call to end AIDS

**P**resident Yoweri Museveni has come out again to rally the country towards an effort that will see the country taking drastic measures to end AIDS by 2030. Like before, the President's message has always been clear, HIV is a simple disease to avoid and everyone today can take a personal decision not to catch or spread the disease.

With clear eyes and full hearts, let us all decide to put aside our political and other differences to rally behind the President and put our country back to a path that will see a generation free of HIV and AIDS. This is a crucial intervention by His Excellency at a time when the country is on track towards achieving set targets. For example, for the first time in about six years, the number of babies born with HIV has fallen from 28,000 in 2011 to about 3,000 currently. This is a clear indication that if current efforts are fast tracked, the possibility of an HIV/AIDS free generation is in sight.

First we need to open our eyes to the realities that stand in our way of ending AIDS. The reasons that brought about a slippage from some of our earlier gains against HIV, afterwards we need to heed the President's call and move forward with clear hearts that this is a battle we can all win, if we put our differences apart and stand together.

Where did we go wrong as a country? We went wrong when we became complacent; after our successful efforts of the early 1990s. The country went in a complacent mode thinking the war had been won. As a result, people reverted to the pre-epidemic HIV risky lifestyles of unfaithfulness and unprotected sex. In the end, this has proven costly for us.

As part of this complacency, we got our foot off the pedal, the troops went silent, parents, teachers, community leaders, political leaders, religious leaders, cultural leaders, the media etc. All these stopped talking about HIV and AIDS because they assumed all was well and, therefore, there was no need to talk any more.

This silence was instead marred by confusion. We began communicating messages to the public that did not make sense to them as what action they were expected to take. Some messages were outright wrong. Take for example, the

miracle cure of AIDS claimed by some people.

In this renewed effort by the President, we call upon everyone, especially the men, to focus their efforts and resolve to protect themselves and their loved ones from HIV. We call upon everyone to take the vow of faithfulness to their loved ones. A man who loves his family is also ready to protect it all the time by being faithful. Complacency does not help, it is also important that we take the initiative to know our status all the time by going for an HIV test. The President is also calling upon all of us to recommit ourselves and use our different spaces to talk about preventing HIV and ending AIDS.



*We got our foot off the pedal, the troops went silent, parents, teachers, community, political, religious and cultural leaders and the media all stopped talking about HIV/AIDS*

We call upon parents, teachers, local leaders, religious leaders and cultural leaders to use their influence and spaces to remind everyone that HIV is still here with us and that AIDS still kills. However, the knowledge on how to avoid it is available and we all know what to do. To the parents, it is not good enough to raise our HIV-free generation of babies only to lose them as soon as they become sexually active. Please go beyond your occupation and jobs and create quality time with your children. Talk to them and build good morals and how it is important to delay sex until marriage. Let us be brave and pass on a clear message to our teenagers. The message for the young people is clear; choose a lifestyle that does not expose you to risk of infection; do not succumb to misguided peer pressure that could lead you to getting infected and finally do not enter into sexual relations when you are still young.

Finally, when it comes to messaging, working in close collaboration with all partners, the Ministry of the Presidency through Uganda AIDS Commission instituted a message clearance committee. This committee is in charge of clearing all messages regarding HIV and AIDS before they are sent out to the public. I call upon all stakeholders to utilise this committee in order to weed out all confusing messages. Let us all go out today and take an HIV test. Let everyone make a personal decision to protect themselves, their children, spouses and others.

**The writer is the Minister in Charge of the Presidency**