

Candlelight as a motivation to end AIDS

Uganda's fight against HIV and AIDS remains one of the country's most significant public health achievements. From the devastating peak of the 1990s, when HIV prevalence exceeded 18%, to the current rate of about 4.9%, Uganda has demonstrated that political leadership, community mobilisation and collective action can change the course of an epidemic. Yet as the country advances towards its goal of ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030, one symbol continues to unite the national response — the candlelight.

Today, Tuesday, Ugandans have gathered at Kitante Hill Secondary School alongside millions around the world to mark the annual Candlelight Memorial. For more than three decades, this event has evolved from a solemn remembrance of lives lost into a renewed call for action, responsibility and hope. The candlelight reminds us not only of the lives lost to HIV and AIDS, but also of the urgent need to protect future generations.

Since the early 1980s, over two million Ugandans have lost their lives to AIDS-related illnesses. Behind these figures are families, communities and children whose lives were deeply affected. Lighting a candle each year is, therefore, both an act of remembrance and a commitment to continue the fight.

At a time when HIV is increasingly viewed as manageable, there is a growing risk of complacency. The candlelight serves as a reminder that

the epidemic is not yet over and that every effort still matters.

The commemoration has also become a platform for collective ownership. While awareness about HIV is widespread, the challenge today lies in translating knowledge into consistent behaviour change. Ending AIDS is not solely the responsibility of the Government or health workers. It requires action from families, schools, faith institutions, community leaders, the private sector and individuals themselves.

This message is especially important for young people and women, particularly adolescent girls and young women who continue to experience a disproportionate burden of new infections.

Candlelight commemorations help place these groups at the centre of the national conversation while also recognising their role as advocates, caregivers and change makers within communities.

Equally important is the role of candlelight activities in fighting stigma and discrimination. Despite years of progress, many people still fear judgment, rejection or exclusion if their HIV status becomes known. This fear discourages testing and delays treatment.

Candlelight vigils create safe and compassionate spaces where people living with HIV can share their experiences

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openly. These testimonies help communities move from fear and misinformation towards understanding, empathy and solidarity.

Beyond remembrance, the candlelight has become a catalyst for practical action. Across the country, the commemorations are accompanied by school outreach programmes, faith-based engagements, health campaigns and community mobilisation activities.

These efforts encourage more people to test for HIV, seek

treatment early, support one another and openly discuss prevention.

This year, the Uganda AIDS Commission is once again partnering with Village Journeys Africa to increase awareness around ending AIDS within communities through the Walk, Cycle and Run for Good Health initiative.

The partnership seeks to promote healthy living while mobilising communities to actively participate in the HIV response.

Part of the ongoing activities this year includes a series of HIV city marathons that will be held at different times across various cities in Uganda. These marathons are expected to bring together communities, young people, health advocates, development partners and institutions in a united effort to promote awareness, fight stigma and encourage healthier lifestyles. These will climax into the National Uganda AIDS Marathon in Kampala on November 29, 2026. I, therefore,

urge all partners, institutions and members of the public to actively participate whenever these activities take place within their respective locations.

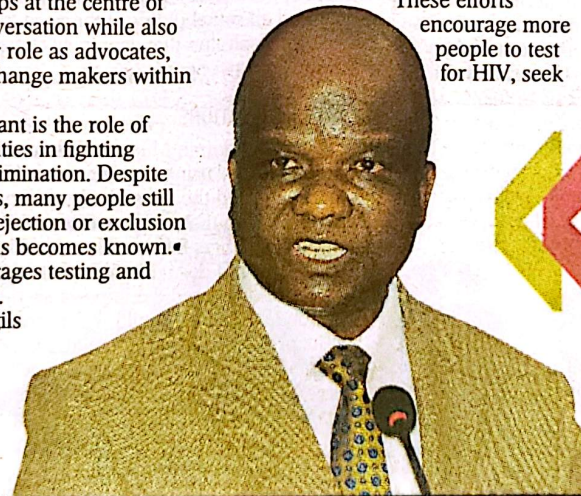
As Uganda enters the final stretch towards ending AIDS by 2030, the need for unity, compassion and sustained commitment remains as important as ever. While significant progress has been made, the country still records thousands of new infections each year. Every new infection is a reminder that the fight is not yet complete.

The candlelight, therefore, remains more than a memorial. It is a symbol of resilience, hope and collective responsibility. Each flame represents both a life remembered and a life that can still be protected. As we gather this year, let us recommit ourselves to ending stigma, encouraging testing, supporting treatment adherence and ensuring that future generations inherit a Uganda free from AIDS.

Together, through remembrance, action and compassion, Uganda can sustain the momentum needed to achieve an AIDS-free generation and protect the health and dignity of all its people.

Continued community engagement, responsible leadership, stronger family support systems and sustained investment in prevention will remain essential in achieving this important national goal for Uganda.

The writer is the director general of the Uganda AIDS Commission



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