

TAC Electronic Newsletter

By *moderator*

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Letter written by scientists to President Mbeki

Over 80 scientists have signed a letter to President Mbeki calling on him to dismiss the Minister of Health. The letter is available here: <http://www.aidstruth.org/letter-to-mbeki.php>

[END OF LETTER BY SCIENTISTS]

The tradition of Steve Bantu Biko and Rick Turner - The tradition of student mobilisation in the crisis of government and HIV/AIDS: Reclaiming the tradition of non-racial democracy 1

By Zackie Achmat, TAC Chairperson (Speech at UCT, 6 September 2006)

- Comrade Nqobile Ndlovu, friends, comrades, students, staff and representatives of societies: thank you for the invitation to address you on the most serious crisis our country faces. This is the crisis of governance and HIV/AIDS in South Africa. To put it differently, it is a struggle for the right to life and the accountability of leaders in a democracy.
- Today I speak to you as a person living with HIV/AIDS. I am healthy and I have the hope of decades of natural life ahead because of my use of antiretroviral medicines. I speak to you also as chairperson of the Treatment Action Campaign and a lifelong ANC member.
- Almost exactly thirty year ago on 2 September 1976, I was one of the school students at Salt River High who

marched in solidarity with the Soweto students who were brutally beaten, arrested and 700 killed by the apartheid state. The solidarity, the struggles and sacrifice of students, lecturers, workers, women, unemployed and millions of ordinary heroines gave us the freedom, equality and dignity we all enjoy.

- Their sacrifice, our humanity and our Constitution obliges us to address the crisis of governance, infection, illness and death that has pervaded this country for almost a decade. HIV is a test of personal responsibility and self-governance, as well as a test of leadership, accountability and political governance.

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF 1000 NEW INFECTIONS AND 900 DEATHS EVERY DAY?

- Last year, Ronald Louw - a friend, activist comrade, conscientious objector, human rights lawyer and an alumnus of UCT joined a growing group of my friends from this university who died of AIDS-related illnesses.

- He was one of more than 300 000 people who died in faeces, pain, suffering and without dignity. What is the meaning of statistics? Why do they numb us? How can we mobilise and marshal our facts without losing our humanity or exaggerating our despair?

- In 2003, South Africa recorded on its death certificates for the first time that the number of adults who died aged 30-34 exceeded any other number of age-sets including children aged 0-5 traditionally the highest category of recorded deaths. Since the advent of President Mbeki's tenure more people have died in their 30s than in their 70s.

- In a different context, Richard Dawkins - a brilliant contemporary scientist has said that the human mind cannot appreciate different timescales. We are attuned biologically to appreciate seconds, minutes, hours, years and decades. We have a limited conception of centuries and the work of geology and biology, for instance, can only be measured in the timescales of thousands and millions of decades. Imagine that. Similarly, the statistics, the death certificates, the scale of infection, illness and deaths similarly is outside our comprehension.

- With HIV/AIDS, our country has already seen more than a million deaths. A formerly decent scientist, Professor Anthony MBewu of the Medical Research Council, admitted to Parliament for the first time that in the last year, our country has lost 336 000 lives. That is on average more than 900 deaths every day.

- In the Lebanon crisis, where the world was justly outraged and is mobilising an army to maintain peace, 1500 people lost their lives with thousands of casualties. In Iraq, an unjustified war and occupation claims the lives of about 1500 people every month while the world pays at least \$200 million dollars every day to ensure peace and stability.

- We have a duty to oppose violence, inequality and injustice everywhere. We have a duty to seek freedom for the Palestinians and security for all the people of Israel. The Rwandan genocide showed what happens when the best people in the world remaining quiet and unmoved.
- There is no conflict on this earth - not Darfur, not Somalia, not Burundi, Sri Lanka, Palestine or Israel that claims more lives than HIV/AIDS in South Africa. These conflicts must demand our attention and support. But where is the urgency to save lives and prevent HIV infection in South Africa.?
- Where is the voice and action of the powerful and privileged globally and locally to deal with the holocaust against the black and poor and above all women in South Africa?
- Where is the local and global emergency room on HIV/AIDS? Antiretrovirals are not a cure but they can save lives like diabetes or hypertension medicine.
- Where is the emergency plan to put 1 million people on treatment and to ensure that we have the money for it from local and global sources? We need you to help build that global emergency room.

PREVENTION, PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND LEADERSHIP

- The new HIV infections are worse than the death rate. We have 1000 new HIV infections, on average, daily. HIV infection is painful, it causes anxiety and suffering. Without appropriate knowledge, with silence, with stigma and without leadership, it causes unnecessary and premature death. We have to affirm that HIV prevention is a right to life.
- HIV prevention cannot be reduced to ABC. Prevention includes: knowledge about sexual and reproductive choices and rights, condoms, mother-to-child prevention, harm reduction programmes for youth who use cocaine, heroin and tik, post-exposure prophylaxis for victims of sexual assault and health workers. Most importantly, prevention also means a woman's right to choice and equality. It includes the right and duty to take an HIV test.
- Prevention must include leadership to demonstrate personal responsibility and self-governance. Self-governance means protecting oneself and protecting others. This means the President and his whole cabinet must show leadership in getting tested publicly for HIV. It means the leader of every religion or faith getting tested publicly for HIV. It means every school principal, trade union leader, sports personality, every nurse, doctor, employer getting tested publicly for HIV. Has Bobby Godsell, Cyril Ramaphosa, Wendy Appelbaum,

Jenny Openheimer and Reverend Rebecca Mash been tested publicly for HIV? If not we appeal to them and to everyone of us to get tested.

- A public test by a leader encourages personal responsibility: if you are negative, do everything to stay negative. If you are positive, you can stay healthy and when necessary - when your CD4 count drops below 350 - you must seek antiretroviral treatment to save your life, to look after your family and to contribute to your society. Failure to take this test is a failure of personal responsibility and a failure of leadership.

HIV AND THE CRISIS OF GOVERNANCE IN OUR DEMOCRACY

- Last week Judge Chris Nicholson of the Durban High Court said government's lack of leadership and apparent contempt of the court had the potential to be a grave constitutional crisis. Government has affirmed its commitment. I will state it differently to Judge Nicholson - it is both less dramatic than a constitutional crisis but more deep and serious.
- Over the last 8 years, the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) has made countless appeals and requests to government. We have written hundreds of letters, memoranda and submissions to every level of government and the ANC. We have had prayers and protests. We have engaged in litigation and even civil disobedience. Every one of the 175 000 people government claims to have put on antiretroviral treatment is benefiting from the relentless daily struggle of the 20 000 members and 60 staff of TAC, the efforts of countless health workers and a very few good women and men at all levels of government. There is no urgency. No emergency.
- Let us take the Westville Correctional Centre as an example. Before we litigated, before the inmates went on hunger strike, before we won three judgments including one for contempt of court - the AIDS Law Project communicated at least 30 times with Ministers, Commissioners, the Director-General and other officials over 8 months. According to a government tally about 110 inmates died at Westville in 2005. But, today a number of people have started treatment - too few, too late for some but based on our action and on your protest we have saved lives and given practical meaning to the Comprehensive Plan.
- For years we have tried to get Parliament to intervene but that has failed. For years and tomorrow again, we will try to get SANAC to pay attention. But former Deputy-President Jacob Zuma lacked the political courage, the leadership and the self-governance to bring the Health Minister under control while he was chairperson of SANAC, as well as to lead politically and unite the country on AIDS then.
- The current Deputy-President Phumzile Mlambo Ncguka has shown a glimmer of courage. But she too is staying on the safe ground of ASGISA. As she speaks this afternoon at my alma-mater the University of Western Cape, we appeal to her to show courage, self-governance and leadership - learn HIV science, meet the people in Khayelitsha on treatment for more than 5 years and transform SANAC into a mechanism which

leads, takes action and becomes the national emergency room for prevention and treatment.

- But, where does the responsibility for crisis of governance and HIV/AIDS rest? President Mbeki has made a calamitous mistake because of scientific denialism. This has allowed his Minister of Health to undermine science, the Constitution, the Medical Research Council, the Medicines Control Council, the Health Department. Great talent from that department - Dr Ayanda Ntsaluba - the former Director-General of Health and assistant to the late Chris Hani, Ms Precious Matsoso - the courageous registrar of medicines and Dr Nono Simelela, a friend and patient fighter all left the Ministry. We now have a ministry filled mostly with time-servers and incompetent politically obedient bureaucrats.
- President Mbeki does not have the power to bring people who have died back to life.
- Fortunately, President Mbeki also has the power to address this mistake. He has power to unite all of us with the demand of science, human rights, accountability and hard work. He has the power to appoint a new Minister Health and a new Director-General of Health. He has the power to make science work for all of humanity and for the African Renaissance he dreams for all of us. That brings me, nearly in conclusion to science.
- In a recent debate, the Director-General of Health claimed equality for "African science" and Western Science" with the treatment of HIV/AIDS. This a red-herring. It aims to cause a racist division and will further undermine traditional healers and most importantly lead to an unnecessary loss of life.
- Africa, Asia (particularly China, India, Iran, Egypt). Europe, North and South America, as well as the Pacific have contributed to science and medical science. The best of all our knowledge in the sciences such as medicine, chemistry, mathematics and engineering comes from all these traditions. Traditional healers in Africa and South Africa must be accorded respect. But, this comes at a price as it does in all science, professional services and trade - the price of regulation to ensure safety, efficacy and quality for all the people who use it.
- I come from a Malay tradition of using doekoems and panaar water. I refuse to call this Malay or even African science even though it is practised by countless people on both continents of Africa and Asia. All medicines - complementary, alternative, traditional and scientific must be based on the principle of doing no harm.
- In this regard, the Treatment Action Campaign has for years called on government to allocate appropriate resources for laboratory and clinical trial tests for all traditional medicines. We have also called on government to protect traditional knowledge based on a public ownership model of intellectual property.
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Government has failed to do this. Instead, the Minister of Health and her Director-General have allowed unethical and unlawful experiments on black, African people to be conducted by Matthias Rath and Tine van der Maas neither of whom can be described as traditional African health professionals especially in government's deliberately racially-defined notion of "African Science".

THE POWER OF STUDENTS

- What must you do? All of you know these tasks better than I do.
 - First, use a condom if you have sex. Protect yourself and all people from HIV infection. Get tested. If you have HIV, seek treatment.
 - As students you can speak in pubs and sports, dance and political and religious clubs.
 - As students you must join the Treatment Action Campaign -- you have the privilege of education - this is the most important weapon that we have to hold our government accountable.
 - We ask you to donate the cost of a few beers to TAC. We ask you to ask all your families and friends to donate money and time to TAC. Go online today and donate.
 - We have to build the broadest coalition based on freedom, equality, dignity, social justice and science to live with the epidemic, to do prevention, treatment, food security and to build a decent health care system. Everyone of you have a place in that coalition.
 - Study seriously, become good nurses, doctors, scientists, business people, economists - wherever you go commit yourself to the defence of our country's Constitution: the privilege you have is an important weapon to assist the dispossessed and marginalised in our country. Use your privilege otherwise you will not enjoy it.
- I want to make a special appeal to my comrades in the ANC - we have to put the right to life, the Constitution and the Freedom Charter before party obedience. SASCO, the ANC Youth League on this campus must join the Young Communist League in giving progressive leadership on all TAC demands to every student. I commend the YCL on this issue. I do not want to waste my time and energy on Max Ozinsky and his misguided racist factionalism in the ANC Western Cape. I supported the ANC all my life, I invite Ozinsky to

debate this issue with me.

- To my colleagues and very few friends in the Democratic Alliance, I thank you all on behalf of TAC. I want to urge you to join in the daily work of building organisations that serve the poor.
- Most importantly, I appeal to every student and staff member. HIV must become a personal and political priority. We need all of you to save lives.
- A special thanks to my comrades at UCT Nqobile Ndlovu, Nick Friedman, Hannah Hassan, Busi Skosana, Ben Cronin, Colwyn Poole and my friend Doron Isaacs.

1 I dedicate this talk to the following leaders who as students, intellectuals and academics taught me: Neil AGGETT, Neville ALEXANDER, Steve BIKO, Cheryl CAROLUS, Paula ENSOR, Zubeida JAFFER, Johnny ISSEL, Ashley KRIEL, Thandi MODISE, Jean NAIDOO, Hector PETERSEN, Mamphela RAMPHELE, Jonathan SHAPIRO, Abraham TIRO, Rick TURNER AND David WEBSTER -- my tradition in the ANC is working class. I now am privileged and middle class and believe that this privilege must be used to struggle against racism and inequality.

[END OF ACHMAT SPEECH]

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