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World AIDS Symposium:  
"The Children Left Behind,"  
New York, NY  
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## **World AIDS Day Symposium: "The Children Left Behind"**

### **A United Nations Symposium on Children Orphaned by Aids**

#### **Keynote Address by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

**New York, NY**

**December 1, 1999**

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this important session marking—as we do every December 1<sup>st</sup>—a recognition of the importance and the challenge to all of us of facing the AIDS pandemic around our world. President Gerirog (phonetic), Louis Frechette (phonetic), Mrs. Preval, Your Majesty Queen Noor, Harry Belafonte, Mrs. Kofi Annan, other distinguished guests, let me begin by thanking the people for whom this event is most meaningful and who have added so much already. I want to thank Alexandra, Paris, Khomsan and Andrew for joining us today and of reminding us of the immense potential that they and the 11 million other children orphaned by AIDS represent for our world and its future. This is a potential that can be unlocked and nurtured or wasted and ignored, depending upon what we in this room and others in positions of decision-making around the world choose to do. We are here because we do face choices. Every one of us has a chance to choose whether we ignore and leave behind the children orphaned by AIDS, or whether we put their lives, their hopes and dreams at the forefront of our hearts and efforts. And so on this World AIDS Day, we call upon all countries, all leaders, all businesses, all families, all citizens to take responsibility for these children and to ensure that the disease that robbed them of their mothers and fathers does not continue to lay waste to their futures.

Make no mistake, this is a tremendous challenge. We are facing a plague of biblical proportions. In less than two decades, AIDS has claimed 16 million lives around the world. Today, 33 million people are living with HIV or AIDS. Every five seconds, another man, woman or child will become HIV positive. In just five years, 100 million people will have been infected by the HIV virus. And we know that the shadow of AIDS will continue to darken throughout the developing world—home to 95 percent of all people living with the virus. Over the next decade, AIDS will kill more people in Sub-Saharan Africa than the total number killed in all the deadly wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Now for many of us in this room, these statistics have become all too familiar. I hope and pray we never become numb to them, or to the people whom they represent. Like many of you, I have visited many countries and many places, including places in my own country, that are struggling against the AIDS pandemic. I am haunted by the face of a 12-year-old girl I met in Northern Thailand three years ago at a shelter for former prostitutes dying of AIDS. At the age of 10, she had been sold into prostitution, and just a few years later she had returned home to die. She was in a wheelchair, so weak she could barely speak. As I knelt down beside her, I could see the skin stretched tightly across her cheekbones. I thought of all the young girls that I had met and watched with great excitement and admiration as they told me about their plans for the future they envisioned for themselves. That young girl died shortly after my visit. And to this day I think of that gentle face and those warm eyes, and what might have been if she had been spared her fate.

A UNAIDS/UNICEF report released just this morning called AIDS, "the world's most deadly undeclared war." And increasingly, children are caught in the crossfire. By the year 2010, 40 million children will be orphaned by AIDS. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this means that at least one in five children will be orphaned by AIDS. A generation the size of the entire population of South Africa is in jeopardy. All around the world, children are watching their mothers and fathers die of AIDS, and enduring the loneliness and the isolation, and often the shunning that comes from their communities. They are often sent to the homes of overburdened relatives, and they are often then fed last or clothed last or held back from school. Too often they are growing up on the streets, living from meal to meal, with no opportunities for work, much less schooling. For these children, the journey from childhood to adulthood, which has already been painful enough with the loss of a parent, has become a harrowing journey, from mere poverty to complete destitution, from limited prospects to none at all. They are the children of a lost generation, and it is up to us to ensure that we do not also lose them as well.

We are not powerless to respond to the messages that we heard from Andrew and Paris and Khomsan. But none of us can respond to what they have challenged us to do alone. Restoring hope, taking responsibility for these children, and fighting AIDS will require the leadership and concerted efforts of all of us working together—certainly the United Nations, other multi-lateral institutions, governments, communities of faith, businesses, NGOs and private citizens.

Last September at the White House, I brought together leaders of many international organizations so that together we could find ways to improve and better coordinate our efforts to combat AIDS around the world. It was for me an enlightening and heartening discussion. And as a result of that meeting, last week our Office of National AIDS Policy and UNAIDS were able to convene a meeting of donor nations and discuss ways to expand our commitments to fighting AIDS.

In the coming months, we will seek to enlist even more sectors of society for this effort. We will be inviting business leaders and religious leaders to come to the White House to share their experiences in the fight against AIDS, and to encourage them by working together to do even more.

The private sector must also do its part. And I'm looking to the business community to come forward with suggestions and offers of ways to help those who are struggling the hardest against the greatest odds throughout the developing world. The business sector needs the encouragement, the support, and the prodding of all of us to see what it can do in this fight.

More than ever, our children in the fight against AIDS deserve the leadership and attention of those serving at the highest levels of government. This is not just the concern of health ministers. This must be the concern of finance ministers, labor ministers, prime ministers and presidents. (Applause.) AIDS is taking a toll on all sectors of society. It is setting back life expectancies in Africa to what they were in the 1950s; doubling infant mortality; tripling child mortality. Factory owners and employers are having trouble finding healthy workers in many areas. The GNP for those countries worst hit by the epidemic are falling. And an entire

generation is growing up without parents. Very simply, AIDS is not only a health emergency, it is an international crisis. And we need more political leaders to break the conspiracy of silence about AIDS. (Applause.)

I know that this is a difficult issue for many in positions of power and influence to speak about. It is an overwhelming problem. It is a problem that poses direct threats to our sense of morality and humanity. But it is not a problem that will go away by being denied or ignored. Leaders must use the bully pulpit and government action not only to treat the disease, but to change attitudes. We need political leaders to help erase the stigma that keeps too many people with AIDS from seeking treatment. And we must fight the ignorance that fosters the spread of this disease. (Applause.)

I'm very pleased that we have here on the panel these two young men—one from Uganda and one from Thailand. Because I have seen firsthand what happens when a government does take responsibility and launches a committed effort against AIDS. During two visits that I have had to Kampala, I have seen dozens of billboards emblazoned with AIDS prevention messages. I visited an AIDS information center that has helped hundreds of thousands learn more about the virus and has given hope to those living with AIDS, and as Andrew so eloquently told us, has continued to help those who have been orphaned by AIDS. Youth outreach workers in Uganda put together skits and composed songs with lyrics such as, "AIDS cannot win," to teach young people about the disease and how to prevent it. It is a truly impressive effort, and it is paying off. AIDS infection rates have been cut in half in Uganda. I urge other countries, not only in Africa but throughout Asia and Latin America, to look to Uganda as an example of what can be done by concerted government action. (Applause.)

I also commend the government of Thailand for taking strong action against prostitution and to do what it can to spread the word about the way AIDS is spread, and to make it possible for more parents who have often been enticed into selling their daughters into prostitution to understand clearly what the cost is.

I am very pleased also that the United States Congress recently approved \$128 million in debt relief to developing countries around the world. (Applause.) I know that the President has said on several occasions that this money will be money very well spent if it can be used on behalf of the health and social needs of the people in the countries whose debts are being forgiven. I challenge the leaders of these countries to seize this opportunity to bolster their efforts against AIDS and to support the orphaned children left behind.

We know that children thrive most in the embrace of loving families, which is why I was so pleased to hear what Paris told us about his family and the way he feels so totally a part now of a new family. That's why governments, NGOs, churches, other religious organizations—all of us—must target our efforts to help the poorest families care for those children orphaned by AIDS. For a fraction of the cost of one bed in an orphanage, we could help many more children stay with their families. We could provide subsidies for school fees to ensure that orphans, especially girls, do not lose their opportunity to attend school. We could mobilize communities to provide immunizations and food assistance, counseling and other services that the children need. And we could expand micro-finance programs targeted at families that were caring for

children orphaned by AIDS in order to boost their family incomes. I want you to know that the United States is committed to being a partner in all of these efforts. And I am proud that the Congress just passed the President's initiative to add \$100 million this year to our global fight against AIDS. This will enable us to double our financial efforts in Africa. The LIFE Initiative will help countries protect children orphaned by AIDS, care for people living with AIDS, fund strategies to prevent further HIV infection, and support clinics, organizations and outreach programs.

This can not and will not be a one-time commitment. The United States efforts must be sustained and strengthened to meet the immense challenges posed by this pandemic. And I want you to know that the President and I will continue to fight for the funds from the Congress in the remaining time that the President has so that the United States will do its part in the struggle against AIDS. (Applause.)

In the spring, the President will be sending our director of National AIDS Policy, Sandy Thurman, on a fact-finding mission to India. When Sandy returned from Africa, it helped us mobilize support in the Congress and throughout the public. And we look for the same effects upon her return when she reports to the President about what she has seen in Asia so that we can together take steps now to help the people of Asia avoid the devastation that has occurred in Africa. (Applause.)

All nations must work together in a comprehensive campaign to eradicate AIDS, and I congratulate those nations that are cooperating on behalf of the effort to find a vaccine. Together we have to recognize that we are indeed a global village, and that the battle against AIDS in America, in Africa, in Asia—around the world—is a shared responsibility.

Much has been written and said about what we need to do to turn the tide. But it is long past time to move from talk to action. Together we can move from denial to recognition, from fixing blame to taking responsibility, from despair to hope. We can, in Khomsan's words, "fight on together" to ensure that no child is left behind.

I think of the tireless and strong-willed grandmothers in Port-au-Prince and Soweto, who refused to give up on any grandchild orphaned by AIDS. I remember the energetic voices and songs of the dedicated young workers I met in Kampala. I wonder at the resilience of these three children sitting with me today, and the millions of children like them in Rio and Bangkok or right here in New York City, who despite unimaginable loss and pain, continue to find ways to learn and believe in the future. And I look to all of us gathered in this room, on the eve of this new century and millennium, to speak out and fight for our children, and to give them the support and the hope that they need. We have to have the confidence that we can build a world worthy of all of our children. And as we mark this day of recognition and remembrance about AIDS, there is no more urgent task before us.

Thank you all very much. (Applause.)