

**South African AIDS Conference 2003  
Closing Ceremony: Dr. Kgosi Letlape  
August 6, 2003**

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**DR. KGOSI LETLAPE:** Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. My apologies for keeping you from your well deserved lunch. Umm, it's very difficult. This is the part that you get called at a funeral to come and paint the people that have been around. And, you know, it is usually an easy part, because a lot has been said. And I'm glad to see that some of us are so hopeful that we've already left. And that's a good sign. I have issues—I have issues. And it's good to know that we close up together. But it would be great to acknowledge that we have haven't been, and that would give great meaning and hope to the closeness. Time is not on our side. And the greatest challenge of speaking after (unintelligible), a colleague of mine, and Edwin, a great friend, is that they said everything that needs to be said, but maybe there's some little aspect that hasn't been said, that are difficult to say. The pseudo science has been audible. It has had media attention, and it has confused ordinary citizens. And it is a duty that the scientists have, that the fight against pseudo science was not done properly, was left to a few individuals, and was not done with (unintelligible). Because if that had happened, pseudo science should have stayed where it belonged, in the basement of cold New York. And we have to take responsibility and be vigilant. All of us fought for this new dispensation, and the fight is not over. The vicious stigma, which we don't really talk about enough—oh, I'm not

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dealing with it—which is going to be a great impediment for us saving ourselves. I hear people talk about we have about 5 million people living with HIV and AIDS. I'm not very intelligent, but from where I stand, we have 45 million people living with HIV and AIDS. And as we begin to acknowledge that, we will understand that we will deal with stigma. In a company that my wife works for, they say there are two people in this country—or in their company, and that should go for the country. There are those that know their status, and there are those that don't know their status. Stigma is a sign of a society that has lost its humanity. And if we do not deal with stigma, it will remain the single biggest barrier for people choosing to live. You go to Botswana, with commitment from government, their uptake is disappointing. To deal with stigma we have to participate and give of our lives to people that live with the virus, not as an industry but as human beings. That means the fight against HIV and AIDS is not an 8 to 4 job. For this nation, it is a 24-hour job. It is amazing to see counselors that still cannot counsel their families. There's denial in their own families. This is a 24-hour job, and it requires all of us to get involved, because all of us are affected. Then the third factor, which is the male factor, the vector in this disease. And those of you that don't know, I am and I am still a man, and I'll always be a man, but I will say this. We need to deal with that. It is really mind-boggling

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when you have diseases where vectors are mosquitoes. We seem to be far more effective when dealing with diseases when we are the vectors. And the full impact of those vectors are inhumane males hiding behind cultures and various other things that we need to dismantle. If we cannot empower women, we will not survive as a nation. I salute the grandmothers and the few grandfathers who, if they are not drunk, are there to raise the children. And I say this, that it is something that we need to deal with; otherwise, we are not going to win. I speak to young males, and they have this power in relationships at 14. And you need to deal with it and eradicate it; otherwise, the disease will spread. Any self-respecting nation would not be proud of our new infection rates. We need to stem the tide to be able to treat everybody with a dignity that each and every person living within the borders of South Africa deserves. Our constitution doesn't make health a privilege. Health is a right. Let us make that constitution not become a piece of paper. Let us live it. It's not going to be easy, but we're going to do it. I am raised--you know, there's always this notion, and Edwin alluded to it, the can't do syndrome. I am a product of fighting the can't do philosophy. They say we can't do meds, we can't become doctors, we can't do this, we can't do that, we can't be President, we can't lead the country. The currency will go down. All the rubbish of the can't do philosophies. And I'm a living example that we can and we

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will. I am not a product of the perfect system, but I'm a healthy human being. The struggle only ends when you die. Tomorrow I go and bury a friend. For him the struggle is over. For any of us, for the next two to three generations, we will be struggling to make this the best nation the world has ever seen. In our imperfect systems, including our imperfect public health system, should be consumed with what they can do and not what they can't do, and we will survive. I had a discussion with two people, and they said to me, we don't have the capacity—they said, I don't have the capacity to be human. And I stand here, I am a human being. We have the capacity. Raising children is about commitment. Equity is something you imagine. I'm one of five children. Our parents loved us all, but they never treated us equally, and we still love them for that. Utopia is a pie in the sky. Apartheid was about creating utopia for white people. That doesn't exist. There's a lot that we can do. There's many lives that we could have saved, and time is not on our side. So all the good things that I've heard. (unintelligible) that what our right to hear is that we regret not having started with a new dispensation in '94, and we are going to start today. I did a radio interview, and one of the mothers (misspelled?) commended those of us that struggled to stem the tide. And one of the listeners asked, are we ready as a society? And that's a good question. With stigma hanging over our heads, with this being an 8 to 4 job, I

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question our readiness. Each and every one of us should go beyond living of this epidemic and giving to the people that live with the virus, so that we can overcome. I was raised with a prayer. It's a small prayer that we used to say before we eat. We said, "Thank you, Lord, for what we are about to eat. Make us truly thankful." And I grew up, and I had children, and that was the segment of the prayer. And my son came along, from an education in the private school I can't afford, and he said, "and make us truly mindful of the needs of others." And it took an 8-year-old to teach me about the fact that life is about saving others. Life is not about self interest. The greatest danger for our society is self interest, greed, and indifference. When you are indifferent and not involved, you're just as guilty as those that are most unfortunate and letting others have. Remember that. If you are not involved in this fight, you are against those that are involved in this fight. By sitting down and not saying anything, you are making it difficult for us to survive. The last thing I would like to say is this: There's a spirit of working together. A question that always gets asked: What are the successes of the other countries? The thing always comes up-political will. This is a major disaster. And as the medical profession, on behalf of the medical profession, we say we are ready. I humbly ask our President to lead us in this fight, for we are ready. We will be behind him and his troops.

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We are part of those troops. He is our President, and the magnitude of this problem requires him to lead us. And we will follow. He is a good President. He is a President of a good nation. The world is watching us. The constitution we have is not a piece of paper. It is something that every nation should have, and it is something that every human being should fight for. And we back our President. And we of the medical profession say it is time for all of us to hold hands and work together. Lastly, a request. Turn to the person around you and say, I care. Now I'd like you to take the hand of the person next to you and say, we care. Now, I was raised in the township, and I was a gambler, and I was always fascinated. And if those of you don't know, when you play dice, you always say, I do, and you succeed. But what was on the coin was unity is strength. This country belongs to all of us. All of us have a contribution to make, and it is in serving that we will receive. And I say this because what we are up against requires each and every one of us. And in President Thabo Mbeki, we have a great leader. He is going to lead, we are going to follow, and we are going to overcome. Thank you.

**MALE VOICE:** Ladies and gentlemen, while we've certainly seen in our last few speakers, and in the presence of all of you here, that we are certainly not among those who say we can't do. We have just another two minutes. I ask you for your patience. I want to just briefly pay tribute to Zaki

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Afmet, to Edwin Cameron, to Prudence, and all the wonderful people who have worked with us in making this a success, but also who have served as the inspiration that has enabled us to continue when things have looked bad, when we have become dispirited. They're really—it is in their struggle that we have seen what it takes to live with this disease, and they allow us to--through them, to witness it and to see if we can't join hands with them in doing what we can. So I want to just take this opportunity to pay tribute to them. Thank you very much. I also want to thank all the various speakers, in particular Precious, who agreed at the very last minute to come and speak here. Kathy Woolford (misspelled?), who flew all the way from the US just to get here yesterday, so she could speak today. The session that you saw was put together at the last minute. James and everybody, thank you very, very much. Really, I only asked him yesterday. It's great that you're willing to do this at short notice. It shows the (unintelligible) that you're willing to have. I want to make one last announcement before calling Jerry to give a vote of thanks, and that is that we have set a world's record at this conference, and that world record you'll see as you depart this convention center. And the record we have set is for the longest AIDS ribbon in the world. It is over two kilometers long. You will find a big crane holding it up as you exit, and there's a helicopter flying that is trying to keep it up. You

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know, it's just—what a monument. And I want to thank Old Mutual for all of their support and to all of you who went there and bought those pieces of that ribbon that enabled us to achieve two kilometers. Thank you all. And now, Jerry Coovadia.

**PROF. JERRY COOVADIA:** Thanks very much, Slim. I want to just keep you for one minute. You have only seen Slim and me as if we did this on our own. You really must acknowledge with me, with both of us, the rest of the people who made this possible. It would be totally unfair not to do that. So can we have the volunteers who helped us come on the stage here? Can we also have the board members of the—the board members and the committee members—board members and committee members. I want you to see—I want you to see who are the people are. I want to also thank the mayor of the city and the City of Durban. I want to thank the ICC. I want to thank the Foundation for Professional Development, that Gustav Wolfhart (misspelled?). They've been responsible for a lot of the things that have happened. The things which have succeeded, I'm responsible for. The things that have failed, Gustav is responsible for. He is over there. Well, the last point I want to make is, I really want to thank all of you from the bottom of my heart. You have really made this successful. I hope what has happened here has ignited the fires of your imagination and enthusiasm to carry on the struggle. I just

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want to respond to a request that (unintelligible) made, and to assure you that we will try and make this national conference a regular event. I'm not quite sure how often it will be, whether it will be biannual or so, but we will try and make the running of this much wider. We would like to invite all of you to try and participate in being part of the committee, deciding on where this conference should be, who should run it, and so on. So that's my request to you, as a follow-up from what (unintelligible) said. Once again, last, we thank you very much indeed for being here. Drive safely when you go back home.

[END OF RECORDING]