Keynote Address at a Rally on World AIDS Day
Mtubatuba, 1 December 1998

Your Royal Highness
Minister of Health and Home Affairs
Premier of KwaZulu/Natal Province
Amakhosi
Dr. Piot of UNAIDS
Friends and fellow South Africans

We have come to Mtubatuba for World AIDS Day because this province and this area have been hard hit by this deadly virus. We have come here as Partners Against AIDS, to express our solidarity and support. We have come to accept the help of the government and the people of KwaZuluNatal in making our nation understand what this disease really means.

AIDS is one of those problems that are beyond the capacity of any one community, or any province to solve on its own, or even any one nation alone.

To win we must join hands in a Partnership Against Aids, and also work with other nations as part of the international community. We need the help of organisations like the United Nations and it is therefore a special pleasure to welcome Dr. Piot, the Director of UNAIDS who has come to share this day with us.

Although AIDS has been a part of our lives for fifteen years or more, we have kept silent about its true presence in our midst. We have too often spoken of it as if it was someone else's problem.

We had hoped that today, before this rally, we could visit a community that has been badly affected by AIDS, and pay our respects to those whose lives were taken by the disease.

We want our communities to be able to say to our country: Come and witness the reality of AIDS; see the devastation in our community; see the fresh graves; see the courage of those who live with the infection and of the children who have lost their parents.
We must remove the silence that leads companies to say to a newspaper: "We want to put an advertisement in your paper, but it must not be near anything about AIDS";

It is the silence that leads us, when we see all the signs in our friend's face to speak of anything else, rather than ask, "Do you have AIDS? How can we help?"

It is the silence that hangs over our cemeteries when we bury loved ones knowing they died of AIDS, but not speaking of it.

It is the silence that is letting this disease sweep through our country, adding 1,500 people each day to more than 3 million already infected. It isolates those who need our support and help. It threatens to undermine our efforts to grow our economy and build a better life for all our people.

It is time to break the silence.

That is why we are here today as political leaders, following the lead given by Deputy President Thabo Mbeki.

We are grateful to a province that has the courage to declare that it has a high rate of infection. We admire the brave men, women and children who are with us today to say: We are the human face of AIDS - we are breaking the silence! If we are to succeed then all of us must follow these examples and take responsibility for dealing with this problem.

Though we are doing all we can to search for a cure for AIDS, it has not yet been found and therefore prevention is the key to turning the tide.

Because this disease is so new, and because it spreads mainly through sex, prevention requires of us that we speak it in a way that our traditions, our cultures and our religions provide little guidance.

We must repeat over and over again our appeal to young people to abstain from sex as long as possible. If you do decide to engage in sex, then use a condom.

We must repeat over and over again our appeal to all men and women to be faithful to one another, but otherwise to use condoms.

It is possible for any of us to be infected for eight years without knowing it, and therefore to pass on the infection to others without knowing it.

We appeal to all sexually active people who have not tested, to have the test for the virus and if you are infected to openly seek the support of the community.

But we do know that we can only make this call upon those who have been affected if the community accepts its responsibility to give support to People Living With HIV/AIDS.
All of us, in our communities, in our educational institutions, in our workplaces, in our media, in our financial institutions, our places of worship and recreation must work to eradicate the discrimination that denies support and dignity to those who need it. As traditional leaders and people of influence in our communities, provinces and nation let us set an example.

South Africans have overcome obstacles which others thought were insurmountable, because we joined hands to work for good of all rather than remaining divided by less important things.

Just as we defied the prophets of doom who foresaw endless conflict in our land, we can defeat this terrible disease by all of us accepting responsibility for prevention of infection and for care of those who have been affected.

In October we launched a Partnership Against Aids, and declared our united resolve to save the nation.

Since then much has happened, but all of us need to ask ourselves: Are we doing enough to lend strength to the partnership on which our future depends?

What are we doing as teachers and parents? As business people, big and small? As employers and workers?

The young people, who are our future, are most at risk. We rely on their capacity for vision and on the courage that has been shown by people living with HIV/AIDS to give our nation the lead it needs to rise to this challenge.

Together we can succeed. On this World AIDS Day let us make a pledge.

Let us do everything possible to prevent ourselves and our partners from getting infected.

Let us build the Partnership Against AIDS so that it unites every community and sector of our society into a force for change.

Let us break the silence by speaking openly and publicly about AIDS, and by bringing an end to discrimination against those living with AIDS;

Let us care for those living with HIV/AIDS and the orphans, and give them support, with love and compassion;

And let us say that we will wear the Red Ribbon today, and every day, in remembrance of those who have died and in solidarity with those who are infected. Let us wear it as a sign of our commitment to this pledge.

I thank you.