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**Remarks by Stephen Lewis, Co-Director of AIDS-Free World,
delivered at the 8th Women Ambassadors' Luncheon
A UN Agency for Women and the Democratic Republic of the Congo
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When I served at the United Nations in the 1980's, out of the, then, 159 Member States, there were three represented by women Ambassadors. One of them was the formidable feminist and quite wonderful human being, Dame Nita Barrow of Barbados. So highly did many of us think of Dame Nita, and so anxious was she to serve the world, that she was persuaded to run for the post of President of the General Assembly.

She lost. She lost to a male foreign minister, of one-tenth her competence and capacity. She lost, in part, because she was a mere Ambassador and he was a foreign minister. But mostly -- and everybody knew it -- she lost because she was a woman.

At the time, incredibly enough, there had not yet been appointed, since the beginning of the United Nations --- a span of forty years --- a single permanent Under-Secretary General who was a woman.

Things have obviously improved. But we're still achingly far removed from gender parity in the senior positions of the United Nations system. We have failed internally, we have failed externally, and no one should derive any special solace from the incremental progress over the years.

So clear is the failure, especially in the lamentable record of the United Nations on women's rights around the world that, as you all know, a High-Level Panel on System-Wide Coherence recommended, in the fall of 2006, the creation of a new international agency for women. It's useful to recall the words of the Panel: "The message is clear: While the UN remains a key actor in supporting countries to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment, there is a strong sense that the UN's contribution has been incoherent, under-resourced and fragmented."

For a UN report, those are fighting words; scalding language. It's clear that the panellists wanted something entirely different. They went on to say: "We believe that the importance of achieving gender equality cannot be overstated."

Some will bridle at my use of the word 'agency' because diplomacy, fearful as always of offending anyone's precious sensibilities, wanted to rely on abstractions like 'entity' so as not to cause apoplexy among the faint of heart.

But as things have evolved, it's clear that we're moving to the equivalent of an agency, whatever it's ultimately called, and we're moving with surprising rapidity.

Even now, the office of the Secretary-General (more explicitly, the Deputy Secretary-General and her designees), responding to a request from Member States, is fleshing out a model of what the new agency will look like, chosen from amongst four alternative possibilities, one of which is a self-contained separate new fund or programme; another of which is an as-yet-to-be-defined hybrid institutional arrangement. At the moment the hybrid seems to be favoured.

The organization that I represent --- AIDS-Free World --- has no doubt whatsoever which is the best model, and that's the separate, independent fund. Nor do we have any hesitation about the three indispensable ingredients: first, an Under Secretary-General chosen, without prejudice, from amongst the women of the world ... there are, as it happens, a number of remarkable women, in various countries, quietly thinking of vying for the job. Second, the agency should be funded initially at a level of \$1 billion annually (a mere third of UNICEF's yearly budget), and it will be fascinating to see whether the current international financial turbulence is used as an excuse to prejudice the funding of a women's agency. It would be the ultimate irony if the hapless men, corporate and political, who orchestrated the subprime mortgage convulsion, and then found a trillion dollars in the western world to bail out Wall Street and the European banks, could not find one-tenth of one per cent of that amount to address the needs and rights of women world-wide.

If that should prove the case, you can forget about the Millennium Development Goal dealing with gender equality.

Third, the new agency must have operational capacity on the ground, sufficient to plan and implement programmes, influence governments and the UN family, and to support the activist women's groups who have been fighting the good fight both before the Beijing women's conference and after, almost entirely without a shred of assistance from the United Nations. And these same women, let it be said, must be at the table during the drafting and discussion of the new agency. This is no time for the exclusion of civil society.

There will undoubtedly be endless debates about governance and institutional relationships, not to mention the contentious absorption of UNIFEM, the Division for the Advancement of Women and the Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues, but however protracted and difficult the discussions, the convoluted process cannot be allowed to doom the agency.

Those of us on the outside looking in are working on the assumption that the agency will be proclaimed, by way of General Assembly resolution, before the end of the current session. Certainly an increasing number of countries has shown an appetite to have that happen, even if they have to separate the women's agency from the other issues that emanate from the System-Wide Coherence report.

As always, the need for the agency intensifies with every passing day. I can confidently say, as the former UN Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa, that the catalogue of carnage amongst the women and girls of the continent would never have assumed such grotesque proportions if we'd had a women's agency to raise the alarm and to intercede. UNAIDS utterly and tragically failed to

protect the women of Africa (an interesting commentary on the shortcomings of a hybrid agency, by the way), and the rest of the members of the UN family were, for the most part, equally abysmal.

And it matters not whether we're talking about sex trafficking, or female genital mutilation, or child brides, or honour killings, or the absence of property rights, or the absence of inheritance rights, or the absence of laws against rape and sexual violence, or the need to guarantee economic autonomy, or the dismal limits of political representation ... in each and every case, and countless more, the world cries out for a women's agency to intervene.

And if anyone thinks that I'm engaging in self-indulgent rhetoric, just turn your mind to the DRC, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

It is noteworthy that there's such a sudden international frenzy about the resumption of the fighting as the rebels advance on Goma, but no similar international agitation about the war on women that has been the most sickening dimension of the conflict for the last twelve years.

It is noteworthy that the Foreign Ministers of France and the United Kingdom are dramatically scrambling to seek a meeting among the Government of the DRC, the rebel forces and the Government of Rwanda, but it is surely painful to recognize that there has never been an equivalent urgent scramble to stop the unrelieved mass rape.

It is noteworthy that the Secretary-General's representative has just called for additional peacekeeping troops to halt the current rebel military advance, but you've never heard a similar call for additional troops to protect the women from the contagion of rape and sexual violence.

It is noteworthy that just last Thursday, October 29th, the Security Council engaged in its annual debate on resolution 1325 --- the signal resolution to require the involvement of women at the table in all peacemaking negotiations --- and the debate passed with only cursory international notice, and only a repetitive handful of obligatory speeches.

It is noteworthy that at the failed DRC peace agreement negotiated last January, not a single women's voice representing the raped women was at the peace table.

It is equally noteworthy that in that self-same peace agreement, an amnesty was extended to significant numbers of the rapists. So much for the fight against impunity.

It is noteworthy that despite the Security Council resolution, passed unanimously on June 19th of this year, declaring rape and sexual violence in conflict a threat to international peace and security, nothing, but absolutely nothing has happened in the aftermath.

It is noteworthy that MONUC, the DRC's peacekeeping mission and at seventeen thousand strong, the largest in the world, has failed to protect the women of the Congo despite explicit provisions in its mandate requiring it to do so. Let me remind you of that mandate as expressed in the Security Council resolution of December, 2007, renewing the MONUC mission: Article 8: "Recalls MONUC's mandate to use all necessary means to protect civilians under imminent

threat of physical violence, particularly in the Kivus; and Article 18: Requests MONUC, in view of the scale and severity of sexual violence committed especially by armed elements in the DRC, to undertake a thorough review of its efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence, and to pursue a comprehensive, mission-wide strategy, in close cooperation with the UN Country Team and other partners, and to strengthen prevention, protection and response to sexual violence...” Needless to say, for the women of the Congo, Articles 8 and 18 are dead letters.

It is noteworthy that the principle of “Responsibility to Protect”, embraced unanimously by all Member States of the United Nations in 2005, has never been invoked on behalf of the women of the Congo.

It is noteworthy that a consortium of twelve UN agencies, ostensibly united to end rape in the Congo, have never been mobilized or coordinated in effective fashion. Only UNICEF --- far and away the most engaged --- and UNFPA and OCHA have made any appreciable difference.

It is noteworthy that the raping of the Congo’s resources is inextricably tied to the raping of the Congo’s women. The major western powers have known this to be true for more than a decade and have behaved with craven self-interest and appalling indifference. If crimes against humanity were a matter of omission rather than commission, certain industrial countries would be on trial.

It is noteworthy that this horrendous cauldron of sexual violence has finally ignited the attention of the world -- not as a result of multilateral concern, but as a result of crusading journalists on the one hand and magnificent activists like Eve Ensler of V-Day on the other. In some ways what’s happening is exactly like Darfur (though much, much bigger): the entire world knows, and we won’t bring it to an end.

I must say that in my entire adult life, even recognizing the massive scale of gender inequality, I never imagined that the world would stand by while women, in the hundreds of thousands, are mercilessly brutalized in a war that knows no end. At the little Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, an heroic group of doctors attempts to surgically repair the endless stream of women whose reproductive tracts have been impaled and shattered by violence. More and more of the women are HIV-positive. The rapists are in the ascendant. They have learned what all the sophistication of the international community seems to have overlooked: rape is no longer a weapon of war; rape is a STRATEGY of war. Sexual violence is used, consciously, deliberately, willfully, as a way of subduing entire communities through the madness of mass rape --- in the most ghastly of ways --- of the women.

And that’s why AIDS-Free World, and many other activist and women’s groups, will never cease in our determination to achieve a women’s agency. That’s why we hope, with all our collective hearts, that the women Ambassadors here assembled, and the countries they represent, will take up the cudgels for the women’s agency.

Somewhere on this planet there must be a presence and a voice, of influence and power, fighting for gender equality. Where better, I ask you, than the United Nations? What better, I ask you, than a United Nations agency for women?