

Africans see flaws in UN summit on AIDS: Lack of funding targets among concerns

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A three-day United Nations meeting on the global AIDS pandemic has ended with a declaration that some diplomats praised as a landmark but that AIDS activists—including at least one prominent religious figure—called a failure.

“Once more we are disappointed at the failure to demonstrate real political leadership in the fight against the pandemic,” Anglican Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane of Cape Town, South Africa, said in a statement after the meeting that ended June 2.

“Even at this late stage, we call on the world’s political leaders to rise up and meet the challenges that the pandemic presents and to set ambitious targets at a national level to guarantee universal access to treatment, care, support and prevention,” the Anglican cleric said. Almost 1,000 AIDS deaths occur every day in South Africa, where an estimated 5.5 million people are living with HIV.

The UN statement, on the 25th anniversary of the deadly epidemic, made specific references to condom use—a move opposed by a number of Latin American and predominantly Muslim countries. It called on nations not only to promote use of condoms but also to make clean needles available to drug users and give access to care and prevention programs.

The document “moves the global response to AIDS a significant step forward by acknowledging both the need for AIDS crisis management today and for a sustained, long-term response to AIDS in the years to come,” said Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, the agency coordinating the United Nations’ response to AIDS.

But the language of the UN declaration fell short of what many activists had sought, including specific references to those most affected by HIV/AIDS, including gay men,

drug users and sex workers. It also, critics said, refused to commit UN member states to specific numerical targets on funding of AIDS prevention, care and treatment.

“The final outcome document is pathetically weak,” said Sisonke Msimang of the African Civil Society Coalition. “It is remarkable at this stage in the global epidemic that governments cannot set the much-needed targets nor can they name in the document the very people that are most vulnerable.”

Ndungane’s disappointment with the final document was not surprising. In an interview prior to the conclusion of the meeting, the Anglican archbishop—who has not been shy about criticizing the South African government for its response to the AIDS crisis in his country—said he was wary of a statement without teeth.

“Words, words, words—they won’t help us fight the pandemic,” he said, adding: “I’m a born optimist, but politicians are politicians.” *-Religion News Service*