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Former Presidents Urge Leadership on AIDS

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Two former presidents, Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Bill Clinton of the United States, today urged current heads of state and business executives to exert stronger leadership in galvanizing programs to stop the AIDS epidemic.

“There is no doubt that strong leadership is the key to an effective response to the war on AIDS,” Mr. Mandela said in closing the 14th International AIDS Conference here. “Leadership starts at the top, and when the top person is committed, the response is much more effective,” he said, his speech punctuated by repeated applause.

Mr. Mandela also said that although he was among those who have criticized governments over many issues, including AIDS, “we must correct our own mistakes.”

“We have not developed proper strategies to get money out of those we criticize,” he said.

It was not clear whether Mr. Mandela’s criticism was meant to include his successor, Thabo Mbeki, who has been faulted for impeding many efforts to test and treat people in South Africa for H.I.V., the virus that causes AIDS.

When Mr. Mandela closed the last AIDS conference in Durban, South Africa, in 2000, he said the world could not afford to be distracted by the furor surrounding Mr. Mbeki, who at the time questioned whether H.I.V. caused AIDS.

Today, in urging people to be tested for H.I.V. and, if needed, to demand treatment as their right, Mr. Mandela borrowed from American activists in saying that “when you keep quiet, you are signing your own death warrant.”

In his remarks to the conference, Mr. Clinton said he did not know how anyone could explain how the world had let a preventable disease infect 40 million people and threaten to infect nearly 100 million in a few years.

Mr. Clinton said in an interview on Thursday that he regretted not having done more about AIDS as president. Today, he said he is making AIDS his main interest as he seeks to raise money for the International AIDS Trust, of which he is cochairman with Mr. Mandela.

Mr. Clinton told the audience to “hold me accountable.”

But Shaun Mellors of South Africa, a representative of people infected with H.I.V. and the vice president of the conference, said he was not sure how, now that Mr. Clinton is a private citizen, “we will hold him accountable.”

Mr. Mellors said at a news conference that although the speeches by Mr. Clinton and Mr. Mandela were powerful, he was not sure how much “hot air” they represented.

He also said that the conferences -- this one drew 17,000 participants from 124 countries -- had become too large to be useful and questioned whether it was worth its \$14 million cost.

Conference officials disagreed. In addressing the closing session, Dr. Joep Lange of the University of Amsterdam and the new president of the International AIDS Society, pointed to changes that had occurred in the two years since the Durban conference.

Among them were lowering drug prices for third world countries; creating of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and, in 2001, holding the first special session of the United Nations devoted to a disease.

Dr. Lange, like Mr. Mellors and many others, criticized advocates for AIDS research and others for failing to translate the rhetoric of past meetings into more action.

He said that expanding treatment for infected people in third world countries required a country-by-country inventory and plan. "We need to go about it like a military operation," he said.

"If we can get cold Coca-Cola and beer to every remote corner of Africa, it should not be impossible to do the same with drugs," Dr. Lange said.

"Of all the ills that kill the poor, none is as lethal as bad government," he said. "Bad government and lack of leadership has actually killed more people with H.I.V. than anything else."

AIDS activists said that about 50,000 people died worldwide during the six-day period of time during which the conference took place, a figure they said they hoped could be reduced by the time of the 15th International AIDS Conference, scheduled for 2004 in Bangkok.