

Keeping promises in AIDS fight

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By **SANDRA MUBIANA BANDA**
The Progressive Media Project

At one of his recent campaign stops in Durham, N.H., presidential candidate Rudolph Giuliani got a question about HIV/AIDS from an unusual member of the audience, a Zambian mother of two. I was that questioner.

To me, this issue is personal. I am alive thanks to the HIV/AIDS treatment I am receiving through the U.S. government's program in Zambia.

The question I asked on Dec. 1 was a simple one: "If you become president, will you expand the number of people on AIDS treatment and how?"

Initially, I was reassured by Giuliani's response. He said, "Yes, I will. HIV and AIDS is so important, and we will do everything we can for it," and he seemed genuine in his tone.

But later in the day, I saw the statement about AIDS he issued, as well as those made by a few of the other Republican candidates. I noticed how noncommittal they were, and, I am sorry to say, Giuliani's

statement was the vaguest of all.

Mike Huckabee has announced his support for greater AIDS spending, but, in reality his proposal would keep funding at the current level, and he still has not disavowed his 1992 statement in which he said people living with HIV/AIDS should be isolated.

By the end of President Bush's term, the United States will be providing AIDS treatment to about one-third of those who need it to survive, and we in Africa are praying this level of leadership is maintained.

But more than two-thirds of Africans who need treatment to survive are still not getting it. Even more heartbreaking is that every year in Zambia hundreds of children are born already infected with HIV because their mothers are not receiving treatment.

Zambia has made significant progress in the face of this challenge, thanks to donations from the United States and other countries to the Global

Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria.

I was delighted to see the commitment made by Bush at the G8 Summit earlier this year to support a tripling of the size of the fund by 2010.

If this promise is kept, then we stand a much better chance of reaching the larger goal he and the other leaders set, to get HIV/AIDS services to all who need them by 2010.

So far only Democratic candidates have responded to the call from American HIV/AIDS advocates to explain in detail whether and how they will keep these promises.

Is it too much to ask all of the Republican candidates follow suit?

I think not.

While visiting the United States, it was obvious to me that Americans from all walks of life want to see their country do good in the world. Solving the crises of AIDS and global poverty is about basic, human compassion, and Americans from across the political spectrum grasp that fact.

I look forward to a day when the issue of HIV and AIDS will not need promises from presidential candidates and world leaders.

But until then, I know that millions of lives hang in the balance.

Sandra Mubiana Banda is from Lusaka, Zambia. She took part in a speaking tour of the United States with the Student Global AIDS Campaign. She wrote this for Progressive Media Project, a source of liberal commentary on domestic and international issues; it is affiliated with The Progressive magazine. Readers may write to the author at: Progressive Media Project, 409 East Main Street, Madison, Wis. 53703.



Candidates must maintain AIDS leadership

COMMENTARY

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