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REMARKS OF HER EXCELLENCY  
THE FIRST LADY OF THE REPUBLIC  
OF RWANDA

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IUCC World Cancer Leaders' Summit



17 OCTOBER 2023

**Excellencies,  
Champions of Cancer Prevention and Control,  
Researchers,  
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

- ***A big thank you*** to the Union for International Cancer Control, for hosting this World Leaders' Cancer Summit.
- I am also thankful ***to you all*** : health professionals, policy strategists, influencers, researchers and advocates, for welcoming me among you, to share Rwanda's humble experience combatting cancer, in the midst of our national transformation.
- Indeed, despite all the progress achieved in cancer research and care, I too, share your alarm at the growing cancer incidence, and the emerging trends around the world, in this regard.
- At the same time, I draw optimism from the resolve, palpable here today, to design new, more impactful, accessible, and sustainable solutions.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I doubt that there is a single person in this room who needs any further introduction to cancer's brutality, and to the pitifully small number of people who can afford treatment and care.

- Incidence and survival disparities depict our world as one that considers cancer screening, accurate diagnostics and access to advanced care, as privileges of a select few.
- But no race, gender, or economic status should ever own the exclusive right to basic human empathy, whether in policy or in medicine. This goes against the “*raison d’être*” of policy making and medical practice.
- As a civilized world, we must refuse, and rethink this notion.
- This is why we must confront the dynamics behind the failures of our healthcare systems, that perpetuate such inequalities.

**Dear Guests,**

- The calibre of experts in this room, while slightly intimidating to those of us who have to speak before you is, **on the other hand**, for me an illusion-dispenser for our exchange.
- There is perhaps no recent scientific development in the fields of oncology and medical research, of which you are not already aware.
  - how disheartening it feels to learn that in the year, 2020, about 40% (equivalent to 4 million) of cancer-related deaths could have been avoided, by implementing effective cancer prevention strategies: strategies that are attainable across all continents, including in low-income countries.

- **It is a tough reality to confront!**
  
- So, perhaps, what we might want to seize this occasion to ask ourselves, is:
  - Exactly what it will take? ...
  - How long it will take? ... and
  - How many more lives must be lost, before global cooperation, finally, yields victory against cancer?
  
- 1. Universal access to healthcare.
- 2. Public health initiatives that promote cancer prevention through healthier lifestyles.
- 3. Systematic mass screening.
- 4. Controlled medication pricing.
- 5. Wider and more representative access to clinical trials.
- 6. Increased funding for research.
- 7. Policies that improve the quality of life for cancer survivors.

### **What will it take?**

This basic progress is owed to all – equitably! The clock is ticking!

I want to thank all you, Champions of the fight against cancer, for standing your ground in the face of this enormous challenge.

## **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The lessons we have learned, in Rwanda, may be similar to those from across the world: (that) prevention is more humane; less expensive; and more logical than treatment.

- Allow me to share our modest experience, in trying to end cervical cancer, and making significant headway:
- Since the inception of the HPV vaccination for young girls in 2011, we have consistently maintained vaccination coverage rates exceeding 93%, as a result of new screening strategies, based on HPV DNA testing.
- We have also improved care, through equipping all health centres, in every region, with thermal ablation machines to facilitate screening and treatment of pre-cancerous lesions.
- Rwanda believes that access to cancer care should be granted, regardless of geography, gender, age or economic ability. In 2012, we opened, together with our partners, PIH, the ***Butaro Cancer Center of Excellence*** in the northern, rural part of the country.
- This Centre of Excellence provides integrated diagnostic, therapeutic, and palliative care services to: not only Rwandans, but also, to cancer patients from neighboring countries and beyond.

- On World Cancer Day in February 2020, we launched the Rwanda Cancer Center at the Military Hospital in Kigali. This hospital offers comprehensive care: from diagnosis, surgical oncology, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and is equipped with two linear accelerators.
- Future plans include quadrupling the training of health professionals over the next four years, in a programme known as 4x4x4, in line with the National Strategy for Health Professions Development.
- Last year, we launched a fellowship Programme in Gyn-oncology and, before the end of this year, we will start a medical oncology fellowship as well. Concerted efforts in training, infrastructure development, and universal access to service delivery, is at the core of our cancer control Programme.

**Ladies and Gentlemen,**

- We were thrilled to host the newly-launched ***IRCAD Africa Institute*** in Kigali, a beacon of innovation founded by the renowned Professor, Jacques Marescaux. It is poised to become Africa's largest hub for medical training and research in minimally invasive surgery, and digestive cancer research, thus propelling medical research in Africa to new heights. We are grateful to be at the epicenter of this important breakthrough.

- With globalization, have come new consumption habits and harmful exposure, that include pollution, binging on junk foods, lack of adequate physical activity, abuse of addictive substances, among other things.
- **No country remains untouched.**
- The Government of Rwanda, in a bid to address these harmful practices, has launched several campaigns to curb substance abuse, the most recent dubbed “#TunyweLess” (which means drink less). National campaigns also encourage more exercise through car-free days, and reconfiguration of infrastructure, nationwide, to include sports tracks and safe walkways.

**And, all this, to combat NCDs and encourage a healthy lifestyle.**

- In addition, the introduction of tax-free hybrid vehicles and a conservation park with nature trails allows for the control of pollution, as we edge our way towards a carbon-free ecosystem.
- We hope that these efforts, and others, will have a lasting generational impact, in protecting the health of our citizens; encouraging them to preserve their own; and sensitizing them on their personal responsibility to keep our environment healthy and clean.

## **Esteemed Guests,**

- Do allow me to applaud the stellar work of the Union for International Cancer Control, and of its incredible partners, many of whom have also done trailblazing work in Rwanda. I draw much inspiration from you, for my own efforts.
- Life trades us different fates, **for sure**, but the worst place of all is to be poor at heart. Being lackluster, or giving up on innovation because of material deprivation, is just as bad as having a wealth of resources and doing so little, or nothing at all!
- Thank you again for having me here today, **Champions**.
- Partnership is our means; **and** equitable, resilient health systems, our pathway.
- Let us never be faulted for not having put up a good fight.
- When, at last, our collective hard work across the globe conquers cancer, your noble contributions will not be forgotten. Let us pool together; spend every last bit of our energy until, at last, cancer is curable.

We **WILL** win this battle against cancer! ... We **MUST** win!

Good afternoon.