

**STATEMENT OF THE FIRST LADY OF RWANDA  
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 25<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY  
OF  
PROJET SAN FRANCISCO  
Kigali, Rwanda  
15 June 2012**

Honorable Ministers

Senators,

Members of Parliament

Mayor of Kigali,

Members of the Rwandan Scientific Community,

Distinguished guests

Let me begin by extending warm congratulations to Projet San Francisco on the occasion of its celebration of 25 years of existence in Rwanda and 25 years of research on HIV/AIDS.

Founded in 1986 by Dr. Susan Allen, ***Projet San Francisco*** has registered major accomplishments and through it we have learned valuable lessons about the nature and history of HIV infection as well as the future of HIV prevention. Within this time, research initiatives undertaken by PSF together with the Rwandan scientific community and its implementing partners have saved lives, educated communities and guided health policy – both in our country and elsewhere.

PSF has over the years also made great strides in helping communities understand the determinants of heterosexual transmission of HIV and the role of couples voluntary counseling and Testing in HIV prevention.

In collaboration with Ministry of Health and other stakeholders, PSF has undertaken capacity building in public health centers to promote and provide CVCT and family planning services (with particular emphasis on long-term, user-independent methods) and has carried out HIV vaccine trials since 2005.

Permit me to recall, ladies and gentlemen, that in 1986, a group of brave mothers and wives brought their spouses to the *Centre Hospitalier* for HIV couples' testing. As you can imagine, at that time, the stigma and shroud of silence around the infection was overbearing. These pioneer couples helped the global medical fraternity understand that partners in long-term relationships can be discordant. Couples counseling and testing is today recognized internationally as an important HIV prevention initiative with the World Health Organization, earlier this year, releasing guidelines for couples' testing.

With international recognition as a centre of excellence for the expansion of couples counseling and testing, PSF has attracted medical professionals from around the world to study Rwanda's accomplishments in HIV prevention and to learn from its experiences. Rwandan medical professionals from PSF travel throughout Africa and the world, providing leadership and training for others who wish to replicate the model.

Indeed, what began 25 years ago in Kigali as a humble effort – Projet San Francisco – has grown to become a respected partner in global health and an international leader and advocate for affordable and effective prevention, and vaccine development. For these reasons and more, I am

happy to honour the vision and leadership of Dr. Susan Allen, Dr. Etienne Karita and their outstanding team of colleagues at the PSF. I applaud the organization's commitment to health and to the fight against HIV and AIDS.

I would like, this afternoon, to highlight three elements which I believe are important in the global combat against HIV and AIDS:

- (i) *The co-relation between research and implementation.* Most times across the African continent, results attained in research settings are not necessarily implemented or worse still, implementable in the field with the speed and effectiveness required to bring meaningful impact.
- (ii) *Working around resource constraints.* Against a backdrop of limited financial and human resources globally, the question remains – what else can we do that we have not already done before? What can we change to narrow the gap between the laboratory and the field?
- (iii) *Health infrastructure.* Can we re-evaluate the structures or systems that slow down HIV response and innovatively and boldly make the requisite changes to enable these structures respond better to the expectations of an increasingly aware community?

Ladies and gentlemen,

These are some of the questions that we need to constantly ask ourselves at each milestone we conquer in the fight against this pandemic. Key amongst

these is **behaviour change**. I know the work PSF has been doing is central in past and ongoing research on discordant couples within Rwanda. In this regard, we must endeavor to go a step further and seek to change behaviours as well as cultural mindsets of our people toward HIV and AIDS. Can we identify and boldly implement more effective HIV prevention strategies? Can we also identify stronger initiatives in fighting HIV related stigma and in combating those behaviours that fuel the pandemic?

***What else can we do that we have not already done?***

NOW, ladies and gentlemen, is the time to challenge ourselves, to focus our individual and collective energies – more than ever – on accelerated action to completely end this global epidemic that has caused so much anguish.

Distinguished guests,

Allow me a brief diversion to talk to you about someone whose connection to the people of Rwanda is so exceptional that it wouldn't be appropriate for me to leave this state without saying a word about it.

I would like to tell you about one other aspect of Dr Susan Allen that's make her a truly precious friend of this country. As many of you would know; one of the tragic aspect of this country's troubled past is the international indifference that surrounded the 1994 genocide and, too-frequently, the cynicism from some of those who watched this country getting back on its feet against all odds.

Susan is one of the refreshing exceptions Rwandans are glad to have met. She had been living for several years in Rwanda when more than 70 of the staff

that worked under her were slaughtered. What Susan witnessed marked her so deeply, it changed her view of the world we live in.

Project San Francisco had to be evacuated and relocated to Zambia where several genocide masterminds also fled to. It didn't take long before her Rwandan staff was threatened again by the same mass-murderers.

Susan fought them. She fought them hard, and she hasn't stopped fighting since then. The investigations that followed led to the arrests of 3 notorious genocide masterminds who were the first ones to be handed over to the ICTR.

But Susan didn't stop there... For more than a decade she has worked tirelessly with African Rights to bring genocidaires exiled in the West to Justice. She has been on numerous panels, speaking with passion and eloquence against double standards when it comes to international justice, urging her listeners to join her in refusing to accept that Rwandan genocidaires be allowed to enjoy impunity in their own countries while continuing to preach human rights elsewhere.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In Kinyarwanda we say "Inshuti y'ukuri uyimenya mu bibazo" which basically means: "bad times let you know your real friends"

Susan, I would like to use this opportunity to thank you, once again, for being a true friend of the people of Rwanda.

Distinguished guests,

At this 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, I welcome you all to celebrate Projet San Francisco, to honour the organization's past and prepare for an even brighter future. I believe that as we celebrate, we will also re-enforce our commitment anew, and create tangible avenues through which we can contribute to an HIV-free generation. Let us confront future challenges with audacity and determination. Let us harness our collective know-how to build a Rwanda of peace, of innovation, of opportunity but, most of all, one that is free from the scourge of HIV and AIDS.

**HAPPY 25 YEARS!**

I thank you.