



PRESS RELEASE

CONFERENCE OF MINISTERS OF HEALTH OPENS IN JOHANNESBURG

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa, 10 April 2007- The 3rd Session of the African Union Conference of Ministers of Health has opened in the South African city of Johannesburg.

The Conference, which has the theme “Strengthening Health Systems for Equity and Development”, was officially opened by AU Commission Chairperson Professor Alpha Oumar Konare. Other speakers at the opening were the Botswana Minister of Health who is also the outgoing Chairperson of the Conference of Ministers of Health Professor Sheila Tlou; Acting South African Minister of Health, Mr. Jeff Hadebe, and the Regional Director of the World Health Organisation Dr Louis Gomez Sambo.

All the speakers at the official opening ceremony expressed best wishes for the speedy recovery of the South African Health Minister Dr. Manto Tshabalala Msimang who is not feeling well.

The speakers noted that despite some improvements, Africa was still saddled with a disease burden which is a challenge to socio economic development efforts, hence the need to strengthen health systems on the continent. The conference, they said would be an ideal platform to take stock of developments in the health sector and to share experiences, which would allow ministers to best advise their governments.

Among other issues, Prof Konare noted that the conference is expected to come up with an integrated health strategy for Africa. He also addressed the issues of drugs manufacturing and accessibility in Africa, resurgent diseases, management of health systems, cooperation with partners, drug abuse, and the challenges posed by HIV and AIDS, Tuberculosis, among others.

On the necessity of an African health strategy, Professor Konare said that a health map is required from which other strategies could be formulated by individual countries, so as to serve the nearly 900 million people on the continent. He pointed out that diseases have no borders and as such a continental approach is needed to strengthen the health systems.

On drugs manufacture, the Chairperson was resolute that Africa would be best off producing its own drugs, instead of continuing to buy them from outside. This, he said is imperative if the continent is to achieve real progress in health service delivery. Africa should determine the types and quantities of medicines to be produced, and the factories to produce them. He also called on partners to ensure that they do not facilitate

importation into Africa of medicines which have been condemned in the countries of origin.

He however thanked the World Health Organisation and all bilateral partners for their efforts in strengthening health systems in Africa.

The Chairperson lamented the resurgence of diseases such as poliomyelitis which were once thought to be under control. “In 2003, we thought we had eradicated cholera. Only 3 countries were left. But it is coming back,” he said, urging more vaccination and more sharing of best practices. He also drew the ministers’ attention to the need to fight cholera and meningitis. Pointing out that AIDS is a major killer, professor Konare however urged that a lot of attention should also be paid to TB and Malaria.

He encouraged the ministers to speed up implementation of decisions already made to improve the health services on the continent. “We, as African authorities responsible for this issue should not delude ourselves. If we continue at this pace, we will need 100 years to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which we are supposed to do by 2015,” he cautioned. He also said that the target of 50% access to health systems set by the MDGs is too low, proposing instead that Africa should aim for 100% access.

The Chairperson encouraged better management of health services, saying that for the efforts to strengthen health systems to succeed, they must be based on good laws, good governance, good information and communication systems and a sound human resource base. In this regard, he urged ministers to send regular reports to the AU so that correct records on the health status on the continent can be kept.

Turning to drug abuse, the Chairperson expressed the hope that African ministers would act positively to stop drug abuse especially among young people. He also expressed the AU’s wish that the 2010 World Cup to be held in South Africa would be a showcase for drug free sports.

Prof Konare noted that the then Organisation of African Unity (OAU) had health issues as a priority right from its conception in 1963, and this has continued into the era of the African Union which followed the OAU as well as its program NEPAD. As such, he assured the ministers that they could count on the AU to implement the conference decisions.

The official launch of the 3rd Ordinary Session of the AU Ministers of Health also saw the launch of the Elimination of Malaria Campaign, at which famous South African musician Yvonne Chaka Chaka delivered a message and also performed two of her songs. AU Social Affairs Commissioner, Advocate Bience Gawanas also spoke at the ceremony. “If we can eliminate malaria, our children will live,” she said.

The African Union Ministers of Health Conference, will discuss a number of issues such as African Traditional medicine (ATM); Human Resources for Health; Draft Implementation Plan for the Outcome of the Abuja Special Summit on HIV and AIDS,

TB and Malaria; Draft Implementation Plan of Action on Violence Prevention and the Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Plan for Africa.

The conference, which concludes on Friday, is being attended by AU Ministers of Health and their senior officials, senior officials from UN agencies, non governmental organizations and civil society organizations.