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SECTION: International news

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HEADLINE: Fight against AIDS ranks with peace and security for UN: Annan

DATELINE: UNITED NATIONS, Dec 6

BODY:

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan asked United Nations agencies in Africa on Monday to give top priority to the fight against AIDS, saying it was as important as peace and security.

He also urged the rich countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to devote more of their combined 22 trillion dollar gross domestic product to combat the epidemic.

Annan was speaking at the start of a two-day private meeting to launch an initiative called International Partnerships Against HIV/AIDS in Africa, which he said could "make humanity live up to its name."

He said "amazingly it is the first time in the fight against AIDS that members of African governments have sat down together with the UN and OECD donors, with the private sector and foundations, and with members of international civil society."

He recalled that more than half the 33 million people infected with HIV live in Africa and that 60 percent of the 16 million victims of AIDS died there. He pointed out that by the end of the year, 11 million children will have been orphaned by the disease, 90 percent of them in Africa.

"The epidemic is terrible," he said, "but we are not powerless against it."

Among the partners, "we in the United Nations system must make the struggle against AIDS a true priority of our work throughout Africa, on an equal footing with our work for peace and security," Annan declared.

"Today, I ask all UN agencies working in sub-Saharan Africa to put this issue at the top of their agenda," he said.

Donor countries must make more resources available, he said, while non-governmental organisations "must be engaged from top to bottom in making policy and in implementing it," he said.

"They are invaluable partners both in advocacy and in the field," he added.

Annan also urged big business and foundations to help fund prevention and therapy programmes, to protect and educate workers, to educate shareholders and clients, and to "address the need for affordable medicines and research into a vaccine."

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LANGUAGE: ENGLISH