



For immediate release

12 HOUR READING OF THE TESTIMONIES FOR RWANDA FORMALLY ANNOUNCED TODAY BY SURVIVORS FUND

(LONDON 17th June, 2004) SURF, The Rwandan Survivors Fund, today announced its plans to stage a 12-hour *Reading of the Testimonies* (from 6am to 6pm) in Trafalgar Square on Friday 16th July to mark the 10th anniversary of the end of the 100 day Rwandan Genocide.

Women from across the UK will gather in Trafalgar Square for the *Reading of the Testimonies* of 250 female survivors of the Rwandan genocide. These testimonies, highlighting the personal stories of female survivors (many now widows and orphans), represent just 1% of the estimated 25,000 women and girls who were raped and deliberately infected by HIV positive men in 1994.

The *Reading of the Testimonies* not only will raise awareness of the plight of women in Rwanda today but will also focus attention on SURF's *Initiative for Free Antiretroviral Treatment for Women Survivors of the Rwandan Genocide*. A petition, with 1,500 signatories already collected over the 100-day commemoration, will be submitted to Downing Street at the end of the *Reading of the Testimonies*. This complements the Early Day Motion (EDM 941) tabled by SURF Patron Brian Cotter MP, which has received support from over 100 MPs across all parties. Both the petition and the EDM call for the British government to increase pressure on the international community to do more to prioritise and fund medical treatment for this critically important group of women who are now HIV positive. Presently many receive no medication, no shelter, and must cope with the trauma of being raped and the stigma of being HIV positive without support. These women are often the sole survivors of their entire families; many with responsibility for supporting orphaned children.

The testimonies, collected by the human rights organisation *African Rights* in their latest report: *Rwanda: Broken Bodies, Torn Spirits - Living with Genocide, Rape and HIV / AIDS* (April 2004), will be read continuously through the course of the day. Besides the reading of the testimonies, there will be talks from SURF supporters such as Fergal Keane and Lindsey Hilsum as well as a small African market and live African drumming and dance. The report will be available on the day at the event, as will other literature and information about Rwanda and the 1994 genocide.

Female members of the public are being invited to join a host of celebrities at the *Reading of the Testimonies*. Application forms are being distributed through women's groups and charities across the country, and are now available online through www.survivors-fund.org.uk. Visitors to the site can sign the petition, and learn more about SURF's *Remember Rwanda, Ten Years On Campaign*.

Speaking about the forthcoming event, Survivors' Fund Director Mary Kayitesi Blewitt said: "There is a thread that runs through all the work of Survivors Fund, a motivation to ensure that the voice of survivors is heard, that the memory of the genocide is kept alive and that the victims are never forgotten. This readathon is hugely important as it will demonstrate that the people of the UK not only remember the 1 million Rwandans who died in 1994, but that they care about those still living with the legacy of the genocide." She added, "25,000 women and girls raped and deliberately infected by HIV positive men are now dying from AIDS, with no help and no hope. The *Reading of the Testimonies*, and petition, is a demand for action to ensure that these women are not ignored and abandoned by the international community for a second time."

"People think the Rwandan genocide is over, that it ended ten years ago," commented Lindsey Hilsum, international editor of Channel 4 News and the only British journalist in Kigali when the genocide began. "It didn't. Women are dying of the genocide today, because they were gang-raped in 1994 and are now living with HIV and AIDS. I hope the *Reading of the Testimonies* will bring the stories of these women to more members of the public, so people can know that it's possible to save some of these women by getting them life-saving anti retroviral drugs. We say 'Never Again' about genocide - but it means nothing if we allow these women to die."

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Notes to Editors:

What is the Initiative for Free Antiretroviral Treatment for Survivors?

The First Lady of Rwanda, Mrs Jeanette Kagame, launched the Survivors' Fund Initiative for Free Antiretroviral Treatment for Survivors at a Parliamentary Reception on Tuesday 20th May 2004. The initiative aims to deliver greater support for the 25,000 women survivors deliberately infected by HIV positive men during the Rwandan genocide by mobilising the international community, in particular governments and pharmaceutical companies, to do more.

What is the wording of Early Day Motion 941 tabled before Parliament by Brian Cotter MP?

That this House recognises the ten year anniversary commemoration of the genocide in Rwanda which began in April 1994; acknowledges the importance of such an anniversary for international relations; hopes that, following this human tragedy, the United Nations as well as all countries, regions and peoples throughout the world will learn from its terrible consequences and ensure that a similar tragedy never happens again; notes that the campaign by the Survivors Fund to support women survivors of the genocide who have contracted HIV/AIDS as a result of a concerted campaign of rape and sexual violence in 1994 is valid and indeed crucial for helping the women to lead a normal life; further recognises that the lack of access to affordable antiretroviral drugs inhibits their ability to work and take care of Rwanda's children; therefore acknowledges that the legacy of the genocide is still very much a problem in today's Rwanda; and calls upon the Government to increase pressure on international pharmaceutical companies to reduce the cost of antiretroviral drugs for the developing world. (30th March 2004)

How much money do you need to make a difference?

Survivors' Fund has estimated that it would cost only about \$12.5m a year to buy the antiretroviral drugs needed to give the estimated 25,000 women survivors infected with HIV/AIDS their lives back. The total sum is equivalent to half the pension pot of Sir Richard Sykes (Chairman of Glaxo SmithKline) or the salary of Richard Jay Korgan (Chief Executive of Schering-Plough)..!

Why is the treatment so important?

The treatment would enable the women to become economically active again, look after their children and live a relatively normal life. All of this reduces the cost of orphan care, medical care, and frees up hospital beds. And more importantly it gives some hope back to these women, many who have literally nothing left to live or look forward to except death.

Why is it the responsibility of the international community, not the Rwandan Government's?

The international community stood by and failed to prevent, react and stop the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, a Genocide where one million people were killed and tens of thousands of women were raped. The international community is presented with an opportunity to redeem itself. The women survivors of the genocide were neglected once and now they are dying from HIV/AIDS because they can't afford anti retroviral treatment. Is the international community planning to now abandon them a second time?

Why discriminate to support women survivors infected with HIV/AIDS in particular?

Most of the target group for Survivors' Fund Initiative for Free Antiretroviral Treatment for Survivors are widows. They often are the sole survivors of their entire families. On average, each widow supports 7 orphans. And as they continue to die, the number of orphaned children in Rwanda will continue to rise.

In addition, the perpetrators of the genocide – those standing trial at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda who allegedly led the systematic programme of deliberate sexual violence during the genocide - are receiving free antiretroviral treatment. Meanwhile, the victims not only have no medication, but many also have no shelter, and struggle to meet other basic needs. They also have to cope with trauma of genocide and rape, and the stigma of being HIV positive. Where is the justice in that? The Department for International Development has recently announced its commitment to give \$200,000 to support the cost of providing antiretroviral treatment for witnesses. I applaud this gesture, but what of the thousands of women who are unable, or have not been called, to serve as witnesses at the tribunal?

How would the drugs be distributed?

There are already structures in place. The Rwandan government has set up a fund for survivors called FARG, there are doctors with expertise in HIV/AIDS and the hospital in Butare also has extensive experience and expertise in dealing with HIV/AIDS patients. Survivors Fund is already supporting grassroots organisations such as the widows' organisation AVEGA and Uyisenga, a charity established to deal with HIV/AIDS orphans which would help roll-out the programme.

It is also worth bearing in mind that there is medication already available in Rwanda; the problem is that it is simply not affordable.

What is the Survivors' Fund?

Survivors' Fund, or SURF, is a charitable organisation dedicated to aiding and assisting the survivors of the Rwandan genocide.

For more than six years SURF has helped survivors of the Rwandan genocide deal with and recover from the tragedies of 1994, supporting a wide range of services for victims in Rwanda, and assisting survivors in the UK. Funded by a variety of organizations and individuals, SURF acts as a channel to distribute financial assistance to groups, individuals and charitable organizations in the day-to-day operations of bringing the people of Rwanda hope, safety, and a decent standard of living.

SURF was founded by Mary Kayitesi Blewitt, a British Citizen of a Rwandan origin (who lost family members and relations during this tragic event) and other Rwandans based in UK, and concerned British individuals. Although support to survivors dates back to 1995, SURF was formally established and registered in 1997.

SURF continues to build a meaningful and lasting positive effect to the lives of those widows and orphans who survived the tragic events of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

Survivors Fund (SURF) is a registered charity number 1065705 and a company limited by guarantee number 04311565. More information at www.survivors-fund.org.uk

What is African Rights?

African Rights is a human rights organization with a difference. It does not claim to be "neutral" but instead advocates on behalf of those suffering injustice and oppression.

Through research and publications programmes focused on countries scarred by violence, including Rwanda and Somaliland, African Rights highlight abuses and bring the voices of victims, as well as other concerned parties, to the centre of debates on how to secure rights.

African Rights was established in 1992 by Rakiya Omar, when the military intervention in Somalia highlighted the need for an independent critical voice. The organisation initially concentrated on examining the international approach to conflict and famine in Somalia, but soon developed human rights and justice oriented programmes in other parts of Africa.

For further information contact info@africanrights.org or see www.africanrights.org.

What have people been saying about the Initiative?

Mrs Jeanette Kagame, First Lady of Rwanda

Here in Britain, initiatives such as the Survivors' Fund are critical in providing hope and practical support to survivors of the Genocide, many of who are widows and orphans living in desperate conditions. I commend SURF for its tireless efforts to raise awareness and desperately needed funds to assist survivors.

Right now in Rwanda, of the thousands of women who were infected with HIV, in the deliberate, and systematic campaign of rape during the Genocide - the exact numbers are not yet known - only a deplorably small number are receiving ARV treatment. The vast majority have nothing to look forward to but a slow and painful death, often with the knowledge that if they had the means, they would get treatment to prolong their lives and enable them to care for their children.

This initiative is an opportunity, perhaps, the last one we have, to do the right thing. Our hope is that the International Community will accompany Rwanda and support us in our efforts to comfort survivors, especially the women living with HIV and AIDS, and to build a decent future for Rwanda's children.

Lindsey Hilsum, International Editor of Channel 4 News

Returning to Rwanda ten years on, to my horror, I find that people are still dying as a result of genocide. I met women who had been gang-raped week after week in 1994. Now they are dying a long, slow, agonising death from AIDS. And what are we doing? We are watching again. They will die, just as their husbands and fathers and mothers died ten years ago. For the tenth anniversary of the genocide, politicians shout "Never Again". But what meaning does that have if women are still dying because of the genocide in Rwanda?"

But there is an answer. SURF has started a campaign for free anti retroviral treatment for the women who survived genocide and rape. The price of these drugs has greatly reduced, and this year major aid donors are going to start anti retroviral programmes in Rwanda. As yet, none has committed itself to putting the women victims of rape and genocide at the front of the queue. By contrast, some are preparing to provide treatment for the men who murdered these women's families, as they're released from prison. SURF's campaign is the only hope for these women. If SURF succeeds, not only will the lives of many of these women be prolonged, but they will be able to carry on caring for the orphans of genocide. If we don't get treatment to them, they will die, one by one. And once again - just as we did in 1994 - we will have watched, and done nothing.