Summit, Some More

December 1, 2000 By Doug Allen

More than 150 world leaders descended on New York City in September for the United Nations' Millennium Summit, a meeting organized to fill, or at least gab about, a tall order—find solutions to the globe's biggest problems. And speaking to the epidemic's ravages for the first time, they added AIDS to poverty and world peace at the top of the priority list.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan kicked off the three-day diplomatic session with a press conference urging international cooperation. "The issues we are dealing with—from the elimination of poverty to the fight against AIDS and the protection of the environment—are issues that require all hands on deck," he said. Though Annan said he hoped a cooperative international effort could reverse the spread of AIDS by 2010, activists from ACT UP/New York and other groups protested outside the nearby office of Fluconazole-maker Pfizer, denouncing the UN chief's decision to include the drug company in a "global compact," a nonbinding agreement to abide by human rights regulations.

Each diplomat was allotted only five minutes to address the full assembly, which more than a few used to spotlight HIV. Even the notoriously homophobic president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, allowed that three of his cabinet ministers, several traditional chiefs and a "countless number" of his extended family members had died of AIDS.

The White House responded with a statement that the Clinton Administration "strongly supports Secretary-General Annan's call for stepped up international action to halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS." The release listed examples of the "aggressive response to the challenges posed by global disease" offered by the U.S. so far, but named no new initiatives.

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