

STATEMENT ON THE CASE OF ROSEMARY NAMUBIRU

February 18, 2014

Dear Media Leaders in Uganda:

We are writing to you regarding a matter of urgent concern. As you know, Rosemary Namubiru, a Ugandan nurse, is currently on trial for negligence associated with the insertion of an intravenous needle into the arm of a 2-year-old hospital patient. Because the trial is in process, it is not our intention to discuss the details. The facts will be argued in court and a judgment will issue.

However, there is one aspect that must be addressed: the quality of the media reporting in the immediate aftermath of Rosemary's arrest. Unhappily, the media engaged in unabashed and unverified sensationalism. Rosemary was branded a "killer", guilty of maliciously and intentionally attempting to transmit her own HIV infection to a child. Subsequent to those allegations, the baseless rumour-mongering escalated: various news reports branded Rosemary a fiendish serial offender; a nurse who was mentally ill; a nurse without credentials.

It must be noted that the prosecution dropped the attempted murder charge the day the case went to trial. Sadly, we're convinced that the charge was originally laid because of the media frenzy. And is there now a new charge? Yes: criminal negligence. Attempted murder carries a possible life sentence; criminal negligence carries a maximum of seven years. It is a matter of grave concern that not a single member of the media, so far as we were able to ascertain, highlighted the dramatically reduced charge.

In the upshot, Rosemary's life has been ruined. No matter the outcome of the trial, the panorama of ferociously intemperate accusation will haunt her and her family forever.

But without for a moment diminishing the damage to Rosemary, we must also point out the damage to all people living with HIV and AIDS. This case constitutes a frightening precedent. Surely it is evident that if the same circumstance had involved an HIV-negative nurse, the media would never have assumed that her intentions were evil.

Rosemary has become the subject of a nationwide smear campaign because she is HIV-positive.

There is great irony in the reporting of this case. Uganda has always been the country to which activists, scientists, academics, bureaucrats and politicians turned for inspiration in the fight against AIDS. Everyone has the same regard for the way in which the nation's leaders and citizens worked together to dramatically reduce prevalence rates and battle stigma.

Now, as a result of libelous news reports, the lives of a Ugandan woman and her family have been destroyed and stigma has been revived.

We, the undersigned, make no unjustified demands. We ask only that the media acknowledge and address the injustice it has done to Rosemary Namubiru. International journalistic standards have been grossly violated by inflammatory misrepresentation. If integrity is to be restored, an apology to Rosemary is in order, with the additional undertaking that in the reporting of HIV/AIDS, restraint and balance will be the watchwords.

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