

# Stephen Lewis has one word for us: **HELP**

**He is part of a Canadian political dynasty, one of our most eminently reasonable men. But since he was appointed UN Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa, he says, his job has left him 'emotionally unhinged' - exhausted, enraged, heartbroken. If this crisis is enough to break Stephen Lewis, asks STEPHANIE NOLEN, shouldn't it be more troubling to the rest of us?**

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CHIRUNDU, ZAMBIA -- In a noisy truckers' bar on Zambia's border with Zimbabwe, Stephen Lewis is being cruised. A luscious young prostitute named Neeka, clad in a backless snakeskin top and skintight black Capri pants, presses close to his side. She pushes a beer into his hands, grinning as she evaluates the prospects he presents.

There are a lot of idle long-haul truckers in the bar tonight, drinking away the hours until the border reopens. But Mr. Lewis -- the quintessential Canadian, dressed in a plaid collared shirt and chinos -- is the only white man, a startling presence whose pale skin screams money.

Though he rarely drinks, Mr. Lewis accepts her beer. Over the thumping bass of the music, he shouts questions: What does she know about AIDS? Does she use condoms? How many partners does she have?

Mr. Lewis is not shopping. Like Neeka, late on a humid Zambian evening, he is working. The United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa settles in at a picnic table to watch the business conducted in the bar. Neeka realizes that she will not earn anything here, but she leans on the wall nearby and obligingly answers his questions about the mechanics of the sex trade in Chirundu.

Mr. Lewis is in the twilight of a distinguished career. He is a former leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition in Ontario. A former deputy executive director of Unicef. A former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations. Now, at 65, he has been named a rare U.N. special envoy. But this post is no plum. It may, in fact, be the worst job going -- to bear witness on behalf of a disinterested world to the disintegration of a continent.

He has reached the bar after a slow, chilling walk through the pitch-dark border town. A group of outreach workers from a World Vision AIDS education project led him past a snaking line of massive transport trucks, parked on both sides of the road, where small groups of women moved from truck to truck. Sex workers here have an average of five clients an evening; they earn 20,000 kwacha [\$7] for a "full-service" trip into the truck cab, but 10,000 more for "live" sex, without a condom.

An estimated 80 per cent of these women have HIV or AIDS. The truckers, almost without

exception, have wives back home -- wives with whom they will have sex tomorrow or next week.

This is ground zero in the AIDS pandemic. It is a textbook example of the reason that one in five adults here has HIV/AIDS. Of why Zambia's life expectancy has fallen from 58 years to 37 in the past decade-and-a-half. Why the hospital wards are crammed with stick-thin patients drowning in the fluid in their lungs, their agony unrelieved by even Tylenol. Why there is one teacher left alive in rural schools with 250 students. Why there are gangs of feral street children in Lusaka. Why there is a national coffin shortage.

All his life, as a socialist politician, Stephen Lewis has championed unpopular causes. This is something different. He can see what is happening to Zambia in all its vivid apocalyptic reality. He tells people, and no one disputes his words -- presidents, prime ministers, some his life-long ideological opponents, all acknowledge the truth in what he says -- that Zambia and a dozen other countries in sub-Saharan Africa are disintegrating in real time. That AIDS is wreaking a destruction in Africa nearly unknown in human history.

But governments ignore him. Rich nations commit pitifully small funds to fight the pandemic. Mr. Lewis pleads for intervention to stave off the total destruction of societies. No one listens. And this job, this role of latter-day Cassandra for the 21st-century plague, is driving him from despair into something approaching madness.

"What is driving me crazy, and making me emotionally unhinged, is that we're losing too many people," he says one afternoon, his voice raw, slumped in the back seat of a white UN Land Rover ferrying him from one scene of devastation in rural Zambia to another. "I can't stand it. And I just don't know how to break through. It wouldn't take that much. It could be turned around."

He sinks even lower, looks out the window and speaks almost to himself. "I'm not getting anywhere. As much as there are a million things to be done, the fact is that we can't get anywhere on these resources. I wake up regularly in an absolutely incensing rage at not being able to break through."

In the orphanages and the hospitals of southern Africa, he is the Stephen Lewis with whom Canadians are familiar, engaged and asking questions. But in Washington and Geneva, the stolid, prim responses of bureaucrats and donors and diplomats drain the life from him. Sometimes, when the door closes after these meetings, he rages and he rails. Sometimes he can say nothing at all.

This job has robbed him of his sleep, of even a moment's peace. "The absolute worst of the job, the part I can just can't handle, is the death."

Though his love affair with Africa goes back nearly 50 years, a seedy truckers' bar in Zambia is a long way from home for the man who has grown from scion to patriarch of one of Canada's few political dynasties.

Mr. Lewis is the son of David Lewis, once leader of the federal New Democratic Party, and he inherited the family politics: After dropping out of several university programs, he moved to London to work for the Socialist International. There he learned of a World Assembly of Youth being organized in Accra, Ghana, and he set off to represent Canada. He was meant to stay for a matter of days; instead, he stayed for years.

"It got in my blood very early," he says. "The exuberance, the music, the vitality, the tremendous capacity of the people. And once Africa gets into you, you never get it out."

He came home in 1962 to manage a campaign for his father. A year later, working for the party, Mr. Lewis met his wife, journalist Michele Landsberg, with whom he would have three children: Jenny, now a casting director; Ilana, a lawyer, and the mother of an infant son, Zev, on whom he dotes; and broadcast-journalist Avi, who is married to the writer Naomi Klein.

Soon, though, Mr. Lewis was pressed into electoral service himself, and in April, 1963, was elected as an MPP for York Centre in Toronto. By 1970 he became leader of the provincial party, and in 1975, his NDP became the official opposition. He was admired in the legislature, yet when the party's fortunes declined, he blamed himself, and left politics in 1978. As a speaker and commentator, though, he became famous -- no matter what one thought of his politics -- as one of the country's most eminently reasonable men.

In 1984, Brian Mulroney raised eyebrows by naming Mr. Lewis ambassador to the United Nations; he had a strong bond with the Tory prime minister, in their opposition to South African apartheid. Mr. Lewis held the job for four years, then stayed on as a special adviser on Africa until 1991; he was deputy executive director of Unicef for three years in the late 1990s.

In 1999, in a brief foreshadowing of his current role, Mr. Lewis took on the thankless and painful job of chairing the team that investigated the 1994 genocide in Rwanda for the UN. He was blunt in laying blame at the doors of France and the United States for standing by while 800,000 people were slaughtered.

Little came of that report. But it moved United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who tapped Mr. Lewis for the job of special AIDS envoy in June 2001 when he felt the need to draw special attention to the catastrophe in Africa. "The SG," as Mr. Lewis calls his friend of almost 20 years, likely knew what he was getting in this envoy -- one who would not restrict his language to diplomatic niceties.

Yet the UN didn't take the job seriously when he was appointed. It took him more than a year to get an office, a part-time salary for an assistant, and a phone line at UN headquarters in New York. And he, too, did not understand at first what it would mean. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. It's even worse than the Rwanda-genocide stuff -- because it never ends."

Today, Mr. Lewis is almost troll-like in appearance, with enormous unflattering glasses, sketchily cut grey hair, small threads hanging off his suit. His face is seamed and jowly, his nails are bitten to the quick. He has a dark and deadpan sense of humour, though his quips are often lost on the dry diplomats or muffled in the cultural translation for African hosts.

He is astoundingly good at his work. He wades into a crowd of HIV-positive schoolgirls, asks everyone's name, then remembers each one 15 minutes later (although they are all multisyllabic Bemba names). He engages instantly with crowds, any crowd: AIDS orphans, ambassadors, skeptical reporters, old village women.

He is a brilliant extemporaneous speaker, with a freakish grasp of the facts on each nation he visits: How many teachers died of AIDS last year and how many fewer new ones were trained? How many

households are now headed by children? How much does a course of anti-retro-viral drugs cost in Malawian kwacha, in Kenyan shillings?

And he never sleeps. "He gets on a night flight to Nairobi, he works the whole way, he gets off the plane and goes to a day full of meetings, he goes to a dinner where he finds out he suddenly has to make a speech, and you go back to the hotel late at night and he says, 'I'm just going to do a few emails and make a few calls and do you want a wake-up call because I'll be up before 5,' " says his assistant, Paula Donovan, who travels with him. "It's not human."

It is not that Mr. Lewis is one of those people who "doesn't need" sleep, she says. It's simply that his sense of urgency keeps oblivion out of reach for more than an hour or two. "He's up in the morning, but he feels terrible."

In Africa, Mr. Lewis insists on informality, flinching when referred to as "Your Excellency," introducing himself only as Stephen. When forced to sit through lengthy speeches of welcome by chiefs or ministers, he resigns himself, then sits almost visibly quivering as precious time is wasted.

He does see some things he can do. It was Mr. Lewis who first pointed out that HIV/AIDS merited only a laughable two-line mention in the lengthy New Economic Plan for African Development (NEPAD), heralded as African leaders' blueprint for a political future. And Mr. Lewis was the first major figure to describe the face of the pandemic as female, noting that women now are the majority of infected people, yet also carry virtually all of the burden of nursing, care-taking and additional labour. He was chastised early in his appointment for talking in terms of "murder by complacency," but the phrase is now commonplace.

He has a vast faith in the United Nations, to which he refers constantly as "the UN family." But he has none of the career diplomat's striving love of systems and protocol. He asks disarmingly frank questions that startle his Zambian hosts; he tactfully raises socially taboo issues, such as the wildly escalating incidences of sexual abuse of children by parents and guardians whose resources are strained past all coping.

His style is something new for the life-long diplomats and aid workers he runs into in the field. In Lusaka, he meets a group of men and women in their 20s, only one of whom can afford \$50 (U.S.) a month for the drugs that would keep them alive. Their anger leaves Mr. Lewis near tears.

"He seems to get quite worked up," says one senior UN officer, wrinkling her nose in distaste.

The statistics are mind-numbing, and Mr. Lewis can recite them at length. Three-quarters of the people in the world with HIV/AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa, and 90 per cent of those do not know they have it. Of the 30 million infected people on the continent, only 30,000 have access to the anti-retroviral drugs (ARVs) that have made it a manageable, chronic condition in the first world.

The typical African is dead three years from the time he or she learns they have the disease. Some 9,600 people die of AIDS-related diseases in Africa every single day. That's the city of Nelson, B.C., dead each day.

Mr. Lewis is in Zambia as part of a fact-finding mission to four countries on the relationship between AIDS and the growing famine in southern Africa. The epidemic has cut sharply into the

work force that grows the food in what are still largely subsistence societies; AIDS has left households with more orphaned mouths to feed and placed a huge burden on women, who must do the farm work even as they nurse the dying.

In theory, Mr. Lewis will assess the problem and return to New York to advise the Secretary-General. But it is obvious that Mr. Lewis is also eager to Do Things. Of presidents, of local groups of people living with AIDS, he asks over and over, "What can I do? What do you need that I can help with?" His itinerary in each country has been planned exhaustively by the resident UN mission, but within hours he's packing more in.

Government and NGO figures who had expected one more dry diplomatic exchange are moved by his urgency, by his offers: to get the government moving on drug access, or to call the Global Fund for AIDS, TB and Malaria and find out why it has not sent Zambia the first installment of a promised \$98-million (U.S.) grant to make those drugs available.

This is how Mr. Lewis has reshaped the nebulous job of envoy -- taking its literal meaning, "messenger." The AIDS patients can't get answers from the government on drug access, so Mr. Lewis will get the answers for them. He promises Western donors that he will tell senior government ministers of their concerns about a lack of political leadership on AIDS. He will find out why a starving village has had no shipments of food aid.

Two days into his visit, he arranged another meeting to tell the people with AIDS what he learned. The group was clearly shocked he did it. "No one ever reports back to these people," he raged later. "It's the most degrading thing in the world, to be dying and to make a plea, and no one responds."

So Mr. Lewis is also a conscience, sometimes unable to temper his scorn. At the start of a cocktail gathering with ambassadors and donors, he asks if someone can explain why there is not a single Zambian with HIV/AIDS in their large "theme" working group. No one responds, so Mr. Lewis concludes the 90-minute conversation like this: "Nobody here addressed my question of the people living with AIDS in the theme group. So maybe you can talk about that as you sip your wine."

On his travels through Africa, Mr. Lewis is asked for money, for staff, for drugs, for support, for training. Sometimes the pleas come from stubborn or frightened governments with limited plans to tackle the issues. And sometimes, far worse, they come from people with all the skills and knowledge they need, but no money.

"Do you feel you're drowning sometimes?" he asks Andrew Mutenga, Zambia's Minister of Education. "That it's too much? I can't imagine what the future will hold unless you're able to start a recovery process immediately."

The next day, Mr. Lewis and his UN escorts are back in the Land Rover, driving across the country to the home of Chief Hanjalika, in the southern district of Mazabuka.

Religious leaders in Zambia, as in so many other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, have put up huge resistance to promoting the use of condoms, despite the fact that transmission in heterosexual sex is the source of virtually all HIV infection in the country. Chief Hanjalika, alone of the traditional and religious leaders, has embraced the fight against AIDS.

In his region, an estimated one in four adults are infected with HIV. In the last few years, the chief has managed to end the practice of ritual sexual "cleansing" of widows, and eradicated the taboo of talking to young people about sex. This morning he has assembled a thousand of his subjects. With a bemused and delighted Mr. Lewis looking on, the chief begins his proselytizing.

"It is my duty to come and educate you, my subjects, about this disease -- it has come to stay, and you must be very careful," he says in booming Tonga. The chief proceeds to his safer-sex demonstration, brandishing a condom in one hand and a round-tipped nightstick in another. The crowd begins to giggle.

Mr. Lewis steps forward obligingly to hold the nightstick while the chief rolls down the condom. Then the chief mimes the way in which a woman should keep hold of a sheathed penis. By now, his subjects are convulsed with embarrassed laughter.

Mr. Lewis, though, beckons a translator and addresses the crowd urgently: "You have a great chief. I would like to take him all over Africa, to talk to all of Africa, the way he has talked to you today. I have never heard a chief before speak so honestly and so openly about AIDS to his subjects.

"It is a terrible thing that is happening in Zambia today. There is hunger and there is AIDS and together they are killing many people. When I see the hospitals I see medical wards of men and women dying of AIDS. When I go into villages of Africa and into the homes I see the fathers and mothers dying of AIDS." Once again, it is almost as if he is talking to himself.

And then he remembers where he is, and wraps an arm around the chief. "I'm proud to stand beside such a man, because he is giving you such leadership." The crowd claps thunderously.

But when Mr. Lewis moves into the crowd to shake some hands before he leaves, people begin to mime to him, thumping their rail-thin chests, their hollow stomachs, yanking up the shirts of their babies to show concave bellies. He does not need to speak Tonga to understand that no one here has any food, and no one knows how they will survive.

The chief tells him it has been more than a month since the last World Food Programme delivery to his district; a composed and dignified man, Chief Hanjalika begins to weep as he tells Mr. Lewis about the old people who come to his house, people who have not eaten in five days. Mr. Lewis promises to investigate. As his Land Rover pulls away, the energy drains from him and he crumples into his seat. He stares grimly out the window, his jaw set, his hands clenched.

When he arrives in Lusaka later that day, to the cocktail party with donors, he makes a beeline for the World Food Program representative. He wants to know when food was last delivered to Mazabuka. He wants to know if it's been a month, and why. The WFP rep listens with her eyes widening; she pledges to find an answer. Mr. Lewis says, nicely, that he would like it before he leaves Zambia the next day.

Mr. Lewis says he finished this trip with a grimly sharpened understanding of the spiral between the AIDS pandemic and the food shortage. And he has found a dozen small things he can do -- arranging contacts between North American hospitals and programs here, and calling the Global Fund to find out where Zambia's money is. He sends a strong letter to the director, Richard Feachem. "They just don't want to be called on it. So they will act."

There are things, though, that he cannot do. In Chirundu, he learned from seasoned commercial sex workers that they are angry at the "village chickens" -- girls from the villages, desperate from the drought, who have turned to sex work at the border posts to get food. They are undercutting the standard prices.

"The area is poor and we have hunger all over," Dixon Nkumbuke, a peer educator with World Vision, explained. "Girls and mothers come to Chirundu to draw water or to try to do some work, and in the evenings they find themselves in bars. . . . And they find they could have sex once, or draw 30 litres of water and make the same amount of money, and then they will not be so tired when they have to go home and do the farming."

Some of the women are receptive to the idea of using a condom, said Edah Ngandwe Syanjobo, an outreach worker from the same project, though the drivers remain resistant. Other women say they see little point. "It's very difficult when you have no food at home, no mealie meal and you are offered 50,000 kwacha without a condom or 20,000 with a condom," said Ms. Syanjobo. "And anyway, they say, 'We are already dead.' "

Mr. Lewis sighed, and jammed his hands further in his trouser pockets.

He leaves projects like this and returns to North America, to endless rounds of media interviews and speaking engagements. His speeches, these days, employ the oratorical skill for which he has long been known, underwritten by a new edge of desperation. His tales of the apocalypse are received with ovations and a steady stream of invitations.

But the key things don't change: The Global Fund, suggested by Mr. Annan as the only way to stop the pandemic and intended to raise \$10-billion (U.S.) a year in new funds, has received pledges of only \$2.1-billion over five years. Canada's commitment to the Global Fund is \$150-million (US) over four years; the United States, source of one-quarter of global GDP, has pledged only \$500-million over the next two years.

Pharmaceutical companies still stubbornly refuse to allow generic production of ARVs in Africa, and Western countries still staunchly defend that position in World Trade Organization debates.

Yet Stephen Lewis remains one of the few voices of optimism on HIV/AIDS in Africa. He does believe the course of the pandemic could be changed, with the right resources. "The pendulum is going to swing. . . . With the mobilization of technical capacity, the resources taken together in a master plan, you could turn this thing around in five or six years."

He is hugely heartened by the capacity of people he meets in each country to address the crisis. The orphanages, the community caregivers, the sex workers teaching condom use -- he marvels at what they achieve with miniscule budgets. He gnashes his teeth thinking what they could do with a few thousand dollars. He relies on the credo that got him through years of socialist politicking: "If you keep at them doggedly, tenaciously, if you never give them a moment's rest, you'll make it."

To that end, Mr. Lewis has decided to start a foundation of his own, to channel union, church and community group money directly to the small projects he sees. His daughter Ilana will direct it; he hopes to have it up and running within months.

But it doesn't do much to ease the effects of the endless parade of death. On his itinerary in three days in Zambia was a project to teach basic life skills to orphaned teenaged girls, a project with street kids, and a visit to a hospital ward doing emergency feeding of babies -- a half-dozen died while he was there, and he later said, "That nearly finished me."

The scale of it overwhelms him. "Very few people understand the process of irreversible decline -- we will have failed states. I don't think that's avoidable now. But maybe we can save some lives, save some of those states." Ultimately, it is the very smallest picture that is crippling. "These wonderfully bright, alert young people, and they won't be here next year. Those faces haunt you. They have to."

Ms. Donovan, like Mr. Lewis's family, is alarmed by the toll the job is taking on him. "But," she says reasonably, "it would be weirder if it wasn't affecting him like this. To see all this stuff, all this death, and not react like this -- I think that would be crazy."

Mr. Lewis himself acknowledges, "I am fraying at the edges, and so sometimes I'm overwhelmed. But I'm strong enough at the core to hold it together" -- and then, making a quick crack to leaven the pain in his voice -- "having been a democratic socialist in Canada."

But can he go on, with the endless rounds of desperate mothers and dying babies -- and then the polite luncheon meetings in New York and Geneva? "I've never been clearer about an issue in my life," he says. "I'm going to keep doing it. As long as I can."

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