



## SAMA AND TAC MARCH FOR TREATMENT

SAMA doctors came out in force to join more than 10 000 protesters who marched through Cape Town streets to Parliament on 14 February.

After briefly addressing the crowd in Adderley Street, Chairperson Kgosi Letlape held high the long banner carried by march leaders demanding that government implement a national HIV/AIDS treatment plan. He was flanked by Archbishop Njongonkulu Ndungane and Pan African Congress MP, Patricia de Lille, among others.

The legal march was organised by the activist Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) led by Zackie Achmat with the written endorsement of SAMA and 40 other local and 70 overseas groupings.

All SAMA branches mobilised members, advertisements went out in web publications and most members received emails before the event. Similar mobilisation was conducted by the HIV Clinicians Society, Health and Other Services Personnel Trade Union (HOSPERSA) and the Academy of Family Practice.

Prominent among the many SAMA white coats in the crowd were Dr Linda-Gayle Bekker, Professor Denise White of the Senior Doctors Association (Sehdasa), Drs Mark Sonderup and Anthony Levi of the Registrars Association (Rudasa) and scores of younger doctors from Judasa.

Marchers represented constituencies like people living with HIV/AIDS, trade unions, women's organisations, NGOs, medical and traditional healers, clerics of major religions, academics, students, homosexuals and many more.

The colourful procession to the Louis Botha statue outside Parliament was led by a public address truck, followed by hundreds of marshalls in red and thousands of marchers in white and yellow 'HIV positive' T-shirts.

A small delegation first went to the American Embassy to hand over a

memorandum for President George W Bush and the US Congress. It noted that country's increased donations but demanded that the government give \$2.5 billion to the Global Fund Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2003. It also strongly urged the US to 'reconsider its global priorities to invest in peace and development, as well as to strengthen multilateral institutions'. It further insisted that the US cease being 'the only government worldwide that undermines any meaningful agreement on access to essential medicines at the World Trade Organisation.'

The march then proceeded for 1.5km to Parliament where another memorandum was received by Xoliswa Sibeko from President Mbeki's office, Ebrahim Ebrahim from Jacob Zuma's office, James Ngculu from the Health Portfolio Committee and Barbara Hogan of the Finance Portfolio Committee.

This memorandum, signed by Kgosi Letlape with 16 other sector representatives, contained three demands. Firstly, that the Cabinet sign the framework agreement on a National Prevention and Treatment Plan allegedly negotiated before 29 November by government, business, labour and community representatives at the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC).

Secondly, that the government go beyond the provision of nevirapine to prevent mother-to-child transmission and the treatment of opportunistic infections, to implementing universal access to antiretrovirals.

Thirdly, that the Minister of Trade and Industry stand by government policy to allow all essential medicines and generics to be available to all countries.

The TAC and its allies said they were committed to partnership with government but threatened that if these 'reasonable demands' were not met in February, that TAC activists would

embark on a campaign of peaceful civil disobedience. 'We cannot, with conscience, wait any longer. This is not the preferred route but, in the face of the illness, death and despair that face us daily, we will have no choice.'

During the march, President Mbeki delivered his State of the Nation Address at the first session of Parliament. In this 21-page speech, he devoted two pages to the Iraq war issue, and only two sentences to HIV/AIDS.

In a later interview with SABC 2, Mbeki held adamantly that NEDLAC negotiations had made significant progress but never reached any agreement. This position was defended by Advocate Rams Ramashia, Director General of the Labour Department and the government's chief negotiator at NEDLAC. Ramashia reiterated that a Treasury and Health Departments' task team was finalising research into the cost implications of treatment.

COSATU responded that it was 'distressed' at government's 'willful distortion of the nature of the NEDLAC process.' The third leg of the ruling alliance, the SA Communist Party, has also come out in favour of the NEDLAC plan. Deputy Secretary-General, Jeremy Cronin, said 'we see absolutely no reason why all parties should not sign.'

TAC lawyer Mark Heywood said that although business had also not yet signed, 'it was encouraging that they had resumed negotiations after consulting with their constituencies. We are confident they will sign shortly.'

Many have speculated that Finance Minister Trevor Manuel will announce details of a treatment plan in his Budget Speech of 26 February. Until then, caustic finger-pointing continues from all quarters and prospects for real partnerships grow dim.

**Janet Howse**