

Veneranda: Struggle of an AIDS-infected orphan

By VICKY NTETEMA of BBC

FEBRUARY 28 last year may be last day of the second month of year 2009! But regrettably, it is also the last day of Veneranda Sanga's life, who since her childhood had been battling with the virus that causes AIDS. She passed away last week at Ikonda Roman Catholic Mission Hospital while undergoing further tests to ascertain the illness that had weakened the once very energetic teenager. May her soul rest in eternal peace! Amen.

It is hard to believe that I will not see that happy, tough, caring and ever smiling girl whose short life had touched many in Bulongwa, the village where she lived and Makete District in general, in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. The area is one of the districts in the country with the highest rate of HIV prevalence at 20 per cent and the highest number of orphans (at 20,000 out of a population of 105,000) whose parents died of the scourge.

Veneranda did not behave like an orphan at all! She was always happy and ready to help other orphans and even adults who she thought needed assistance more than her. When in 2005 I met her for the first time at the Bulongwa Hospital orphanage, I could not believe that she was one of children who had HIV. She was bubbly and full of vigour and laughter and she would go round the dormitories reminding other children to take their medicine.

She carried and looked after the youngest orphans as if she were an adult. She did some chores in the premises without being asked to do so. She was the first to wake up and the last child to go to bed ensuring that everyone was safely tucked in bed. That is the Veneranda I know!

It is very difficult for me to speak of her in the past tense.

The little girl from Iniho village who taught many in the area and further afield patience, resilience, tolerance and showed love and care for every human being is NO MORE!

As the youngest PIUMA member (a Bulongwa-based self help group of People Living With HIV and AIDS), she joined the rest of the group on the grounds of Tandala Teachers' College to ask Honourable Jakaya Kikwete who was campaigning for presidency to ensure that they get proper treatment and care. He promised to bring about changes and better life for every Tanzanian. Mr. Kikwete put on Veneranda a reassuring hand in a special photograph showing that if he came to power, he will make sure that PLWHAs get access to VCTs, CTCs and all medical services needed to treat them.

Mr. Kikwete with Veneranda Sanga (centre) and other members of PIUMA on 2nd December 2005

He promised to work with everybody from in and out of Tanzania to save the lives of his people because there is NO NEED TO DIE just because one has contracted the AIDS virus.

That was on 2nd December 2005 a day after a German company PARTEC donated to PIUMA a machine that has the ability to deter-



President Kikwete with Veneranda Sanga (centre) and other members of PIUMA on December 2, 2005.

mine CD4 percentage of children (an essential therapeutic test); a day after PIUMA was officially inaugurated by Dr Kapinga the then Makete District Commissioner. He also promised to work with PLWHAs to ensure that people like Veneranda do not need to die because of lack of treatment and care! 12 days later the country went to the polls to elect their lawmakers and president. On December 17, 2005

Veneranda and all the PLWHAs in Bulongwa had their eyes directed to Dar es Salaam's State House, hoping that their health conditions would improve.

A year later, after more than 270 million Tanzanian shillings from Global Funds was embezzled from the district coffers and the culprits went unpunished, and after more than 270 million Tanzanian shillings

was stolen from Bulongwa Lutheran Hospital (BLH) and again five members of the management team went scot-free the HIV and AIDS clinic funded by Austrian EAWM was closed and its machines, including liver function machine were confiscated, its staff harassed and patients denied the right to be treated.

Why? Simply because Veneranda and her PLWHA brothers and sisters in the war against HIV and AIDS and for justice and human rights had registered their protest against the thieves and corrupt system! Simply because they demanded accountability from the powers-that-be!

PLWHAs like Veneranda in Bulongwa had nowhere to go for treatment and although they had ARVs, adherence and regular check-ups were problematic. BLH got another machine which does not determine

the CD4 percentage for children. The clinic also did not have liver-function machines. So Veneranda and other PLWHAs were not properly treated. The machine does not work and so HIV blood tests had to be sent to Ikonda or Makete and TANWAT hospitals miles away.

BLH does not provide transport for its patients because there is no ambulance.

When bidding the foreign medical staff goodbye after the April 12, 2006 lockout, Veneranda told one of her doctors, "Please do not go, because without you I will die!" The doctor reassured her that she will not die because of HIV if she got proper treatment and care! Did she predict her death? Was she being realistic knowing that the management and the government of Tanzania and politicians would not deliver their

promises?

More than 45 people with the virus died in a period of one year and more continue to die in Bulongwa because of lack of proper treatment and care following the closure and expulsion from the hospital of qualified medical staff including foreign medical volunteers.

President Kikwete and First Lady Salma Kikwete on July 14, 2007, set a good example in the war against HIV and AIDS by being the first to be counseled and tested. It was the beginning of the campaign titled, "Tanzania without HIV and AIDS is Possible!" The Minister for Health and Social Welfare, Prof David Homei Mwakyusa told Tanzanians on February 27, 2008 that the response to voluntary testing is now picking up as a result of the campaign of the same launched by the president.

That was less than 24 hours before she lost the battle to the unnecessary death.

From her deep sleep, Veneranda and many who have lost their lives not to the virus but because of corruption, lack of proper treatment and care would surely ask you "what is the point of testing and knowing your HIV status if in the remote areas of Tanzania you cannot get the right medication?" How will they be better treated if they do not know their CD4 Count? Veneranda was born with the infection and lived her short life with ARVs and there was no reason for her to die today!

When Veneranda fell ill last year while in her second year at a secondary school, she was taken to Bulongwa Lutheran Hospital. Her condition did not improve. Attempts to save her life took her on a hired vehicle to Ikonda Hospital. And now that sweet, ever smiling and caring young girl is gone!

Veneranda is one of many people living with HIV and AIDS in Tanzania who did not have to die! How many more Venerandas should continue to suffer and die as a result of corruption and lack of political will to save lives of PLWHAs? When will the Ministry of Health realise that some HIV and AIDS kits are not suitable for rural Tanzania and also are not children-friendly? When will the authority realise that Voluntary Counseling and Testing is meaningless if not followed up by proper treatment and care including regular check-ups of CD4 percentage?

The authorities have failed Veneranda and many others who were not supposed to die!

The passing on of Veneranda should be a wakeup call for the Ministry of Health and the government in general to improve their HIV and AIDS clinics in rural Tanzania equipping them with machines that work and competent and qualified medical teams.

Lost in her deep sleep, Veneranda's message to President Jakaya Kikwete, his government and parliamentarians is "Tanzania without HIV and AIDS is IMPOSSIBLE if the above are not implemented!"

Veneranda, you have not died in vain! Rest in eternal peace our little friend, the fighter, the guardian angel and the symbol of hope! Amen.