

# A survivor's journey for justice: HIV advocate and UN retiree Eric Sawyer

1 December 2017 – “I contracted HIV before the discovery of the virus,” Eric Sawyer began, as he told his story to an audience of nearly 50,000 gathered in New York’s Central Park earlier this year. The cheers and applause his heartfelt speech received would have been unimaginable three decades ago.

In 1981, when a high rate of a rare cancer was first reported among gay men, nobody knew what was causing it. Researchers initially called the syndrome GRID, or gay-related immune deficiency.

It would be another three years before the virus was identified and eventually called HIV. Not long after the discovery, Eric lost someone close to him from AIDS – his boyfriend Scott Bernard. “He was definitely my soulmate,” the 63-year-old who hails from upstate New York said with a smile, while looking at old photographs. The smile, however, would quickly fade as he began relaying their experiences of discrimination.

Scott was very sick at that time. He had “no hair, looks like a skeleton, and covered with these purple colored lesions,” Eric recalled. The stigma associated with AIDS was palpable. Once, the couple went to a restaurant. Scott was drinking some water from a glass when a waitress came over to their table. Instead of taking their order, she took Scott’s glass of water and “wiped all of the silverware into the garbage can and started yelling: ‘Get out! Get out!’” She called them “diseased” and added a hateful slur to describe the gay couple. Thirty-three years later, Eric still feels the sting of such blatant and heartless discrimination.

The suffering of stigma was compounded by the rapid and uncontrollable rate of death. One weekend, Eric recalled, he would be going to a friend’s funeral and by the next “somebody else died of AIDS.”

**VIDEO:** This is the story of Eric Sawyer and his fight against the AIDS epidemic since the 1980s.

Medical advancements and new treatments were slow to arrive.

Channeling his grief and outrage into activism, Eric joined fellow activists to start a civil disobedience movement. In 1987, Eric co-founded ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition Unleash Power), an advocacy group determined to change the trajectory of the AIDS crisis.

ACT UP was known for its ‘productively confrontational’ style. From disrupting the New York Stock Exchange, to occupying the Food and Drug Association (FDA), the group aimed to draw public attention to the epidemic and put pressure on the United States Government to take appropriate action.

Efforts began to pay off, but despite growing mainstream media coverage on the AIDS crisis, the disease continued to take a heavy toll.

In October 1992, in an effort to help raise awareness about the devastating impact of the disease, ACT UP members brought the ashes of their loved ones who died of AIDS and scattered them on the White House lawn.



Eric Sawyer (left) takes part in a panel discussion at UN Headquarters in December 1995 in observance of World AIDS Day. UN Photo/Milton Grant

“We thought we are going to have about eight people’s ashes,” Eric recalled with visible emotion. In the end, hundreds showed up, including a grandmother who travelled on a bus across the country to bring her grandson’s ashes “because she was infuriated that nothing was done to save her grandson’s life,” Eric explained.

A glimpse of hope finally came in 1996 when the FDA approved HAART, a combination antiretroviral therapy that is highly effective in treating HIV/AIDS. AIDS was no longer a death sentence.

But when Eric learned that the treatment was out of reach for 97 percent of the world’s HIV-infected population, he became outraged at the injustice. “It is not fair that people like myself can have access to these state-of-the-art drugs when people in the developing world have no access whatsoever.”

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In July 1996, during the 11th International AIDS Conference held in Vancouver, where the focus was supposed to be highlighting the effectiveness of HAART, Eric sounded a wake-up call to participants. “Are you listening yet? The headline that people with AIDS want you to write from this conference would read: ‘Human rights violations and genocide continue to kill millions of impoverished people with AIDS!’” he declared from the podium.

Eric pushed for AIDS medicines to be distributed worldwide, especially to the poorest regions. In 1999, he cofounded Health GAP (Global Access Project), which seeks to bridge the gap between access to essential medicines in developed countries and the lack of access in the developing world.

“My activism both was targeted towards UNAIDS to make it do the right thing, but also working with UNAIDS to help them develop the policies and procedures to do the right things,” he said, referring to the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS. Impressed by his commitment to justice for all people living with HIV, UNAIDS recruited Eric as a Civil Society Partnership Adviser in the service of ending the epidemic.

During his time at UNAIDS, Eric helped develop a number of its policy programmes, including the three zeros (zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths) and the ambitious treatment target to help end AIDS known as “90-90-90”.

According to UNAIDS, 17 million people living with HIV still lack access to treatment – with the new HIV infection rate of young sub-Saharan African women especially at risk.



In October 1992, in an effort to help raise awareness about the devastating impact of the disease, ACT UP members brought the ashes of their loved ones who died of AIDS to the US capital to scatter them on the White House lawn. Credit: Tony Arena

Additionally, AIDS-related deaths have risen in the Middle East, North Africa, and also in Central Asia and Eastern Europe, where people who inject drugs account for nearly half of new infections.

To date, over 35 million people have died of AIDS worldwide.

Eric said he is motivated by “survivor’s guilt”. “I don’t know why I got to survive to more than three decades with a fatal illness, when so many of my friends and loved ones died,” he said, adding that he feels obligated to “fight as hard as I can to expand that excess” to care and treatment to the less privileged.

Eric retired from UNAIDS in 2016 and is now Vice President at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, a leading AIDS service organization, continuing his lifelong fight for an AIDS-free world.

“As long as there are still tens of millions of people living without access to treatment, I am going to continue to use my voice to try to draw attention to the lives of people who are dying needlessly around the world still of HIV, until everybody has access to treatment and human rights protection and food security and housing and clean water, and all of the things that should be a human right for everybody living with HIV.”

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## [Central African Republic: ‘Restoring hope,’ UN agriculture agency helps ex-fighters start anew](#)

1 December 2017 – Over 1,000 ex-fighters in the conflict-riddled Central African Republic (CAR) have traded their weapons for farming equipment, as

part of a United Nations [initiative](#), according to the UN agriculture agency.

“This initiative is an important step towards [reaching peace](#) and restoring hope,” said Jean-Alexandre Scaglia, Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)) Representative in CAR.

The FAO-supported UN programme’s message is simple: stop partaking in violence, put down your weapons and, in exchange, you’ll get help to start a new life. Participants get certified training in gardening, horticulture, rearing chickens and pigs as well as tools, seeds or baby animals.

“We are seeing violence rising again to levels as high as in 2013-2014,” asserted Mr. Scaglia, “so giving armed groups an option, a way out, couldn’t be timelier.”

While some ex-fighters rear chickens or grow and sell vegetables, others repair roads and public infrastructure destroyed by the fighting.

“The programme also brings considerable financial gains,” Mr. Scaglia explained.

“On average, the monthly earnings are about CFA 50,000 (\$85), but these activities bring about CFA 200,000 – 300,000 (\$300-500) per month. The programme doesn’t only help restore peace, it also boosts the economy and gives young people a chance to rebuild their country,” he added.

A three-month training programme is held in Bangui, Kaga Bandoro, Bambari and Haute Kotto – regions hardest hit by conflict that still host up to hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

Now, in brightly-coloured rooms in aging town halls or abandoned military quarters, the ex-fighters – men and women who not long ago engaged in a violence that divided the country and horrified the world – diligently sit at their desks, eager to learn.

FAO supports the expansion of the UN initiative for disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and, as part of a new project, will help ex-fighters access micro-credit schemes to start their own businesses.

#### ***A dire situation***

Renewed violence pushed CAR into its fourth year of conflict as over half a million people have fled their homes across the borders or into sprawling internally displaced persons camps.

One in two people suffers from hunger, detailed the UN agriculture agency.

FAO urgently requires \$10 million by February to support more than 350,000 displaced people and vulnerable host communities to resume their agricultural activities and prepare for the March–April 2018 harvesting season by providing them with seeds and tools, and basic veterinary services for their livestock.

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## Media coverage frames public thinking on migrants and migration – UN report

1 December 2017 – Changes in traditional media and growing use of social media are offering new avenues for “migrant-led” media and journalism as well as a unique opportunity for migrants to highlight their concerns and contributions – in their own words – the United Nations International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) has said.

“Ranging from films and newspapers to tweets, [media] coverage may have portrayed migration in one way or another, or simply raised it as a topical issue,” said the UN agency in the latest edition of its flagship report, the [World Migration Report](#).

“Migration coverage is not only positive or negative, but also presents a variety of different issues, narratives and viewpoints [...] identifying how matters are framed is important because [...] media frames affect how people think about migration,” it added.

In the report, IOM argues that while much research evidence, around the world, points to media associating migrants with “bad news,” such negativity is not necessarily unique to migration coverage, as journalists “generally tend to emphasize problems across most topics.”

However, there has been movement towards more positive – or at least more neutral – coverage of migration issues across several destination and origin countries that does not seem to be attributable to any particular event, it notes.

At the same time, rapid multiplication and diversification of social and online media brings potential for good but also pitfalls – in particular, “fake” news.

Citing examples from numerous country, IOM expresses that such news items likely represent only the tip of the “fake news iceberg.”

“Social media make it easy to approach specific audiences with political messages and materials, in ways that can be hard to detect and scrutinize. Such microtargeting of persuadable audiences, identified and contacted through their social media activity, is a growing phenomenon,” it warns.

Moving ahead, the UN agency has urged the need for more research into the role of media in transit and origin countries – and particularly migrants’ own use of, and preferences for, different types of media.

“This is especially important for understanding how and to what extent information sources shape perceptions,” it says, stressing that greater

evidence on whether and how different types of messages and emotions shape public perceptions and policy activity on mobility would be valuable both within and beyond the world of research.

IOM also calls for more attention to different media systems and how they may or may not produce different kinds of content regarding migration, highlighting that the presence of highly differentiated experiences around the world suggests that greater levels of public debate about the appropriate role of media in specific contexts will move forward the conversations already happening in policy, civil society and research.

“Questions such as these will be debated differently across varied local, national and international contexts,” reads the report.

“As a result, both producers and consumers of research should recognize that there is no single, universal way to sum up the role of the media, or to change media coverage of migration.”

The 2018 World Migration Report, the ninth in the series and the first since IOM became a UN agency, [also focuses](#) on themes such as transnational connectivity and violent extremism and social exclusion.

It was launched Thursday at the IOM’s 108th Council meeting, in Geneva.

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## [Massive underfunding hampering relief efforts for the displaced in DRC and Zambia – UN agency](#)

1 December 2017 – With millions displaced within the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and thousands more forced to flee across the border into Zambia, the United Nations refugee agency is appealing for urgent resources to make sure that relief programmes – hanging on by threads – do not collapse.

“The number of refugees fleeing militia violence in south-eastern DRC and arriving in [Zambia has crossed the 12,000 mark](#) – with more than 8,400 arrivals in the last three months,” Babar Baloch, a spokesperson for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees ([UNHCR](#)), told reporters at a regular news briefing in Geneva Friday.

In addition, according to refugee accounts, [more than four million people are displaced inside the DRC](#), and there are fears that many more could be forced to flee the country as fighting is intensifying.

The worst affected are women and children, who form about 80 per cent of the

refugee numbers, and there are reports of civilians being killed, women being raped, private property looted and houses torched.

However, assistance programmes in both countries are “hugely underfunded” added Mr. Baloch, noting that of the \$236.2 million required in the DRC, only \$54.6 million has been received so far, while in Zambia, only \$13.6 million has been received.

“In both cases, this is less than a quarter of what is needed,” he expressed.

According to the UN refugee agency, most of the people displaced from the DRC into Zambia hail from the Haut-Katanga and Tanganyika provinces of the and many among them crossed into the Zambian province of Luapula (which borders the DRC on three sides).

People are also crossing into other northern and north-western provinces of Zambia. In total, the country hosts over 65,000 refugees, including some 33,000 from the DRC.

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## [UN agency to fly 15,000 migrants home from Libya in wake of reported abuses](#)

1 December 2017 – The United Nations migration agency plans to fly 15,000 more migrants home from detention centres in Libya before year-end in the wake of shocking reports of rampant migrant abuse and squalid and overcrowded conditions at these facilities across the North African country.

“Scaling up our return programme may not serve to fully address [the plight of migrants](#) in Libya, but it is our duty to take migrants out of detention centers as a matter of absolute priority,” said William Lacy Swing, Director General of the International Organization for Migration ([IOM](#)) at its Council meeting in Geneva on Thursday.

IOM’s voluntary humanitarian return programme has brought more than 14,007 migrants back their home countries so far in 2017, a significant increased from the 2,775 voluntary returns carried out in 2016. A large-scale airlift already underway will take an additional 15,000 migrants home from detention in Libya by year-end, the agency said.

Libya in recent weeks has witnessed a drastic increase in the numbers of migrants held in detention centres – from a usual range of 5,000 to 6,000 to over 15,000, as migrants have been transferred from unofficial detention centres in Sabratha. Migrants face smuggling and mistreatment during their journey on the central Mediterranean route, which claimed 2,803 migrant lives to drowning this year alone.

To date, IOM has registered more than 400,000 migrants in Libya, with the total number of migrants in the country estimated to be more than 700,000 to one million.

The scaling up of the assistance will also include migrants wishing to go back home but are not in detention centres.

Earlier this week, the African Union, the European Union and the Libyan Government agreed to alleviate the plight of thousands of migrants trapped in Libya. IOM to fully support this initiative.

The establishment of a planned joint task force with all concerned parties is aimed at ensuring that the migration crisis in Libya is dealt with in a coordinated way.

For the returns to be sustainable, IOM is also scaling up its reintegration support for the migrants in countries of origin and will be working on addressing the root causes of migration, as well as increasing our programming to counter smuggling and human trafficking in the migration routes. IOM is appealing for further support to enhance such an approach.

“We are conscious that return alone is not sufficient to address the situation of migrants in Libya, and therefore we are also committed to expanding our advocacy and capacity building efforts in order to introduce new approaches to migration management in Libya, in close cooperation with the Government of Libya and partners in the UN,” Othman Belbeisi, IOM’s Chief of Mission in Libya.

The majority of migrants asking to join IOM’s voluntary return programme are Sub-Saharan Africans, including 4,316 originating from Nigeria, 1,588 from Guinea, 1,351 from Gambia, 1,305 from Mali and 973 from Senegal.