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**Old friends:** Clinton meeting Mandela in Johannesburg on Friday. — AFP

## **End stigma around AIDS, South Africans urged**

**CULLINAN (South Africa):** With cameras rolling and one of the world's most powerful women at his side, Kgosi Kwos Mphahlele for a moment almost felt glad that he is HIV positive.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on Friday toured a US-backed clinic in this small South African town as she appealed for an end to the stigma around AIDS in a nation where nearly six million people are HIV-positive.

Mphahlele, a municipal worker who sought treatment at the clinic, told Clinton that when he learnt in February 2007 that he contracted HIV, he felt "ashamed" as he was always respected in the community.

"But here I am, standing in front of the world, saying I'm HIV positive," said Mphahlele, confidently sporting a green coat.

He felt "blessed" to stand next to Clinton.

"HIV has done a great job for me. I thank my HIV," he said to roaring laughter from Clinton and other senior US officials on a visit to the

former diamond-mining town, 80km west of Johannesburg.

Former president Thabo Mbeki provoked worldwide criticism by expressing doubts that HIV led to AIDS and supporting a controversial former health minister who advocated eating vegetables above taking lifesaving drugs.

"We have to make up for some lost time. But we are looking forward," Clinton said.

Paula Akugizibwe, the treatment literacy coordinator for the AIDS Rights Alliance for Southern Africa, said the United States and other rich nations needed to step up funding.

She said patients seeking treatment were being turned away in South Africa and other African nations such as Uganda for lack of resources.

Officials said the clinic which Clinton visited has treated 1,000 patients since opening in 2006. It was funded by South Africa along with a US\$575,000 (RM2mil) grant from the US government. — AFP