

10 MILLION MORE ASIANS HIV-INFECTED BY 2010 UNLESS URGENT ACTION TAKEN, WARNS NEW REPORT

Bangkok, 8 July 2004 – Countries in Asia and the Pacific region must urgently adopt comprehensive responses to HIV in order to avert a catastrophic increase in infections and drastic economic consequences, according to a new report released today by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The report, entitled *Asia Pacific's Opportunity: Investing to Avert an HIV/AIDS Crisis*, suggests that if prompt action is not taken, by the end of the decade 10 million more people from Asia and the Pacific could be infected with HIV and the economic costs of the virus could have risen to US\$17.5 billion annually. The result would be millions more people thrown into poverty.

More than 7 million people are already living with HIV in Asia and the Pacific, with hundreds of thousands of people dying each year. Economic losses totaled US\$7.3 billion in 2001.

"The AIDS menace threatens to take a massive human toll in the region and jeopardizes efforts to achieve the UN Millennium Development Goal of cutting extreme poverty by half by 2015," said ADB Vice-President Geert van der Linden.

Resource needs to fight the disease are expected to reach at least US\$5.1 billion per year between 2007 and 2010, the report says. However, in 2003, when the region's countries required US\$ 1.5 billion to finance a comprehensive response, only US\$200 million was available from all public sector sources, governments and donors combined.

The report stresses that regional leaders must give top priority to ending the enormous – and increasing – shortfall in finances required to build comprehensive prevention and care responses. In all but a few countries, private households have to bear some of the highest proportion of out-of-pocket spending on health in the world.

"Governments in Asia and the Pacific can still avert a massive increase in infections and deaths, limit economic losses and save millions of people from poverty if they are willing to finance comprehensive AIDS programmes," said Dr Peter Piot, UNAIDS Executive Director. "The role of political leadership is more critical at this point than ever before."

According to the UNAIDS/ADB report, if Asia Pacific leaders implement comprehensive prevention and care programmes immediately they can dramatically reduce the number of new infections and the cost of the epidemic in the region. They are at a 'make-or-break' stage in the fight against AIDS.

"Even in Thailand, which has a relatively strong response to HIV/AIDS, analysis suggests that between 2003 and 2015, the pandemic may slow poverty reduction annually by 38%, unless appropriate measures are taken" says Robert England, UN Resident Coordinator and Chair of the Theme Group on HIV/AIDS in Thailand. During the same period, poverty reduction could also be slowed by up to 60% a year in Cambodia and by nearly a quarter in India.

The ADB is making a concrete contribution to addressing the need in the region and has already earmarked US\$140 million from its Asian Development Fund as grant money for combating HIV in Asia and the Pacific.

The Asian Development Bank is dedicated to reducing poverty in the Asia and Pacific region through pro-poor, sustainable economic growth, social development, and good governance. Established in 1966, it is owned by 63 member states - 45 from the region. In 2003, it approved loans and technical assistance worth US\$6.1 billion and US\$177 million, respectively.

For more information, please contact Dominique De Santis, UNAIDS, Geneva, mobile (+41 79) 254 6803 or (+661) 2500 882, or Graham Dwyer, ADB, (+63) 916 237 7328, email: gdwyer@adb.org. You may also visit the UNAIDS website, www.unaids.org, for more information about the programme.