

HIV INTERVENTIONS MUST BE PART OF TSUNAMI RELIEF EFFORTS, SAYS UNAIDS

Bangkok, 28 January 2005 – As the tsunami relief efforts in devastated areas across the Indian Ocean shift towards long-term strategies, it is essential to sustain HIV prevention and care efforts, said Mr Prasada Rao, Director of the Regional Support Team of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) in Asia today.

The earthquake and subsequent tsunamis have created post-disaster conditions that could increase the risk of HIV transmission in affected regions. In any emergency situation, basic services essential to preventing sexually transmitted infections and HIV break down. Across the tsunami-devastated areas, health care systems have been destroyed, condoms are not readily available and existing HIV prevention and care programmes have been disrupted.

“Refugees or internally displaced persons, especially women and children, are often highly vulnerable to HIV infection during an emergency situation,” said Dr Ulf Kristoffersson, Director of the UNAIDS Office on AIDS, Security and Humanitarian Response. “This tsunami disaster has displaced over 1 million people, many of whom have been separated from or lost their families, spouses or partners. These people have been exposed to unique pressures, working constraints, living conditions and possible gender-based sexual violence, exploitation and abuse, all factors which may put them at increased risk of HIV.”

Dr. Kristoffersson also stressed the importance of briefing and training uniformed services in the region about the risks of HIV infection in emergency situations. “In all affected countries, large numbers of troops and police have been deployed to carry out the relief work,” he said.

While the majority of tsunami relief efforts have focused on lifesaving measures, such as provision of health care, water, food and shelter, UNAIDS has been working to ensure that HIV prevention and care needs do not go unmet and continue in parallel with the emergency response in the affected countries.

“UNAIDS has recognized the need for a coordinated and multisectoral response to integrating HIV activities into all areas of assistance,” said Mr. Rao. “At both regional and country levels, UNAIDS has been coordinating efforts around HIV and AIDS through the work of our ten Cosponsoring agencies, and widely disseminating guidelines for HIV interventions in emergency settings.”

The guidelines have been developed by UN agencies and NGOs, to ensure that HIV prevention and care efforts are included in any emergency action plans carried out by international humanitarian organizations and governments.

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