

AIDS RISK INCREASING IN ASIA, SAYS NEW UNAIDS REPORT

6 million new HIV infections could be prevented in region by 2010

Kobe, Japan, 1 July 2005 – Although the AIDS epidemic is mainly concentrated among vulnerable populations throughout most of Asia, HIV could spread into the general population unless determined action is taken, according to a new UNAIDS report released in advance of the 7th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP), which opens today in Kobe.

According to the report, *A scaled-up response to AIDS in Asia and the Pacific*, countries in Asia and the Pacific stand at a crossroads. They face two options – either business as usual, which would lead to a rise in HIV infections and AIDS deaths, or scaling up HIV prevention and care programmes, which could ultimately stop the epidemic in its tracks and minimize its human and economic costs.

“The risk of AIDS spreading further in Asia and the Pacific is now higher than ever,” said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme (UNAIDS), speaking in advance of the conference opening. “Low condom use, limited access to HIV testing, gender inequality, widespread injecting drug use and sex work are a dangerous cocktail that could provoke a rapid expansion of the epidemic. If HIV prevention programmes are urgently scaled-up, 6 million HIV infections could be prevented in the next five years in the region. If Asian countries do not rise up to the challenge, then 12 million people will become newly infected,” he said.

According to the UNAIDS report, the AIDS epidemic continues to outpace the response despite some signs of progress over the years with growing political leadership on AIDS, increased AIDS funding, greater involvement of the private sector, and increased access to HIV treatment.

Years of low adult HIV prevalence¹ do not immunize countries from the danger of experiencing a major national epidemic. Given that countries in Asia and the Pacific make up 60% of the world’s population, even low HIV prevalence rates (below 1%) translate into millions of HIV infections

However, countries like Bangladesh, East Timor, Japan, Laos, Pakistan, and the Philippines have golden opportunities to pre-empt serious outbreaks of HIV, according to the report. “We must not lose sight of the fact that 99% of people in Asia and the Pacific remain uninfected,” said Dr Piot. “Effective prevention programmes must be scaled up now more than ever. Universal access to prevention and treatment must not be a dream, but a reality.”

According to the UNAIDS report, prevention programmes are not currently reaching those most in need. Vulnerable populations, such as sex workers, men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, migrants and young people do not have adequate access to HIV care and prevention services. For example, in South and South-East Asia in 2003 targeted HIV prevention programmes reached only 19% of sex workers, 5% of injecting drug users, and

¹ Adult HIV prevalence – estimated number of adults aged 15-49 living with HIV divided by the adult population (aged 15-49).

no more than 2% of men who have sex with men. Only 14% of the 1.1 million people who need antiretroviral treatment receive it, according to the latest estimates published by UNAIDS and the World Health Organization.

In Thailand, where an early commitment to prevention made the country one of the world's greatest AIDS success stories, there are fears that reduction of prevention efforts may provoke a resurgence of HIV. For example, prevention programmes targeting injecting drug users, which remain a driving force of HIV, have received only limited government funding.

Women in Asia are increasingly vulnerable to HIV. Gender inequality mixed with HIV is placing Asian women and girls in double jeopardy. In Asia, 30% of girls are married before the age of 15, and 62% before 18, often with much older husbands.

Although funding for AIDS in the region is expected to increase between 2003 and 2007, from roughly US\$681 million to US\$1.6 billion, it is still not enough to slow the spread of the epidemic. An estimated US\$5 billion will be needed by 2007, according to the report. "Too often the available funds for AIDS are poorly allocated and do not reach those most vulnerable to HIV," said Mr JVR Prasada Rao, Director of the UNAIDS Regional Support Team for Asia and the Pacific. "As long as prevention programmes remain under-funded, we will not get ahead of the epidemic. We must do everything we can to make the money work."

The UNAIDS report calls on leaders to consider four key recommendations that could shape the future of the AIDS epidemic in Asia and the Pacific. These include:

1. Tackling AIDS in Asia and the Pacific should become a global priority.
2. Turning commitment into action. AIDS should be viewed as an exceptional crisis that requires an emergency response.
3. Adopting a comprehensive approach that focuses on scaling up HIV prevention, care and treatment programmes. Outreach efforts should target vulnerable populations, including sex workers and their clients, migrants, men who have sex with men, injecting drug users, and young people.
4. Ensuring that civil society groups are part of national AIDS responses, including faith-based organizations, people living with HIV, community groups and the private sector.

The Asia-Pacific region is now home to over 8 million people living with HIV – second largest number worldwide after sub-Saharan Africa. East Asia is facing the fastest-growing epidemic in the world, due to the rapid spread of HIV in China, Indonesia and Viet Nam.

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