

## Press release

### **Joint mission commends India's AIDS response and calls for continued leadership and coordination**

**New Delhi, India, 19 December 2006** – On a joint mission to India, AIDS leaders from the United Kingdom and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) heralded the progress India is making in the response to AIDS. At the same time they underlined the need to build on political consensus and public support to sharpen strategies, which reach out to people most at risk of HIV infection.

During the four-day visit, Sir Suma Chakrabarti, Permanent Secretary at the Department for International Development (DFID) and Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS met with senior officials including the Union Minister of Health Dr. Anbumani Ramdoss, the Minister of Finance Mr. Chidambaram, and the Minister of Home Affairs Mr. Shivraj Patil. They also met with other leaders of political parties in India, senior parliamentarians and with students and representatives from non governmental organizations and from the donor community.

The delegation emphasized the importance of understanding and addressing the social drivers of the epidemic, particularly gender inequality, and insisted on the need for a comprehensive HIV response that adequately addresses the factors that increase vulnerability to HIV infection.

Highlighting that the groups at highest risk of HIV infection in India are those that are socially vulnerable and marginalised, Sir Chakrabarti said, "Action is needed to spread accurate messages so that people – especially women – can protect themselves. Action is needed to tackle stigma and discrimination and a legislative environment that protects the rights of PLWA and marginalised groups is part of that". Sir Chakrabarti emphasized that AIDS can be only tackled by working in partnerships, noting that "DFID and UNAIDS have come together to provide both funding and technical assistance in Bihar to support the State AIDS Control Society to scale up its efforts".

The joint mission between the United Kingdom and UNAIDS presented an opportunity to discuss collaborative sustainable financing and technical support mechanisms and the issue of resource alignment in the context of the nation's new AIDS programme. The delegation also reviewed the United Nations plan to support the next phase of the national response.

On a one-day site visit to Patna in the North Indian state of Bihar, UNAIDS' Executive Director and DFID's Permanent Secretary noted the significant progress made in this province since their last visit, including the establishment of India's first 'Legislative Forum on HIV and AIDS' to raise AIDS awareness among policy makers in the state and to build capacity to address the challenges posed by AIDS.

"Bihar is responding to the global call for inclusive processes and stronger localized responses and this serves as an example for other states in India," said Dr Piot. "To ensure a sustainable response to AIDS for the long-term—in Bihar, and across all of India—HIV prevention and treatment programmes must be scaled-up dramatically and be focused to reach the people most in need and most at risk of infection," he added.

India is the world's second-most populous country, and is experiencing highly varied HIV epidemics which appear to be stable or diminishing in some parts while growing at a modest rate in others. An estimated 5.7 million people are currently living with HIV in India, of which almost 30% are women. The predominant route of HIV transmission is through unprotected heterosexual sex (86%). According to the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO), one

third of reported AIDS cases in India are among young people aged 15 to 29 years. India has stepped up its AIDS response under the Chairmanship of the Prime Minister. A comprehensive, coordinated multi-sectoral response, under the National AIDS Control Programme Phase III, will be ready for roll out in early 2007.

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