

Press release

Decisive leadership urged for long-term response to AIDS in Southeast Asia

UNAIDS report to ASEAN Heads of State notes progress in the region but warns that much more needs to be done to address 'one of the make-or break challenges of this century'.

Cebu, the Philippines, 13 January 2007– “AIDS is not a passing storm but a long-run threat to development and national security in Asia,” the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reported at the 12th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Summit ‘Special Session on HIV/AIDS’, held on Saturday 13 January in Cebu city in the Philippines.

A special report from UNAIDS Executive Director and UN Under Secretary-General Dr Peter Piot on the state of AIDS epidemics globally, in the ASEAN region, and the challenges faced by countries was made available at the Special Session to the Heads of State from 10 ASEAN countries. This is the first time an external body has been invited to brief the Heads of State Summit on AIDS.

“We are still in the early phases of the epidemic in Asia and must redouble and sustain efforts, not let our guard down,” the UNAIDS report said, referring to findings from the 2006 UNAIDS and World Health Organization AIDS Epidemic Update, which show that more people were newly infected with HIV in 2006 than any previous year, and that within Asia, the most severe epidemics are in the ASEAN region where in some countries up to 1.5% of all adults are living with HIV.

“The most worrying fact for the ASEAN countries is that AIDS affects the most productive sections of ASEAN populations, i.e. the workforce which is the powerhouse of economic development of the region,” the report noted.

Underlining AIDS as ‘one of the make-or-break challenges of our time’, the report outlined the threat AIDS poses in the region to the achievement nearly all the Millennium Development Goals. However UNAIDS stressed there are opportunities to put in place a long term response to the epidemic.

The meaningful involvement of community based and civil society organizations – especially people living with HIV – into national AIDS responses must also be a priority. The importance of personal leadership from the Heads of State on AIDS was underlined. “The threat of AIDS will not pass in a year or five years. [UNAIDS] and the world look to you for your continued leadership on AIDS,” the report stated.

The report outlined how a number of countries in the region have made significant progress in ensuring that the most vulnerable communities, including young people, sex workers and their clients, men who have sex with men and injecting drug users, are getting priority in national AIDS responses. In the short-term, increase in scale and size of such programmes focused to reach people most at risk in the region is urgently needed. At the same time

programmes need to take into consideration the drivers of epidemics within countries such as gender inequality, homophobia and HIV-related stigma.

Following the Special Session, the ASEAN Heads of State are due to adopt a Declaration on AIDS, affirming their commitment to prioritize, lead and strengthen national AIDS programmes ensuring policies and programmes respond to the people most at risk and most in need within the region.

ASEAN Secretary-General: commitment and political will key to AIDS response

In his report to the Special Session, Secretary-General of ASEAN Ong Keng Yong observed that “commitment of the leadership and political will are key in addressing challenges posed by the spread of HIV and AIDS”. Secretary-General Ong reported to the ASEAN Leaders on progress made since 2001 when the 7th ASEAN Summit in Brunei Darussalam held the first Special Session on HIV and AIDS, and adopted the 2nd ASEAN Work Programme on HIV/AIDS. Over 2002-2005, regional efforts had contributed to enhancing ASEAN Member Countries’ ability to respond effectively to the HIV epidemic, and increasing the involvement of civil society.

Mr Ong also outlined key points of action over 2006-10 through an operational work plan for ASEAN’s third regional programme on HIV and AIDS. Future ASEAN responses would involve multi-sector initiatives, and closer partnerships with the private sector, civil society, and people living with HIV. He highlighted the main elements in the Declaration of the 12th ASEAN Summit Special Session on HIV and AIDS due to be adopted by the ASEAN Leaders. Mr. Ong drew attention to the “commitment on integration of HIV with development priorities to reduce both the impact of development on HIV transmission, and the impact of the HIV epidemic on development, consistent with ASEAN’s commitments to the Millennium Development Goals and the 2006 UN General Assembly decision”.

The 10 ASEAN countries are: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam.

Contact

Doris Mongaya | UNAIDS Philippines | tel. +63 9 167 36 94 63 | mongayadoris@yahoo.com

Beth Magne-Watts | UNAIDS Geneva | tel. +41 22 791 5074 | magnewatts@unids.org

***UNAIDS**, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, brings together the efforts and resources of ten UN system organizations to the global AIDS response. Cosponsors include UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank. Based in Geneva, the UNAIDS secretariat works on the ground in more than 80 countries world wide. Visit the UNAIDS web site at www.unaids.org*