



## **LARGEST EVER REGIONAL AIDS CONFERENCE TO REVIEW EPIDEMIC STATUS AND CHANGING CHALLENGES IN THE RESPONSE**

*Broadest range of public and non-governmental sector participants ever to address the changing face of HIV in the region and the critical crossroad the response faces*

**Moscow, 2 May 2008** – Starting tomorrow, the second Eastern Europe and Central Asia AIDS Conference (EECAAC II), the largest AIDS-focused event to date in the region, will bring together a wide range of private and public groups at a critical time in the fight against AIDS. EECAAC II is a collaborative effort hosted by the Federal Service on Surveillance Protection of Consumer Rights and Wellbeing of the Russian Federation, UNAIDS, the International AIDS Society and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The conference will take place at the Moscow World Trade Center and will focus on “Accelerating Access to HIV Prevention, Treatment and Care for All.”

Improving the response to the HIV epidemic is necessary to ensure the wellbeing of future generations of young people throughout the region. Given the scale of the problem, a collective, multi-sectoral effort is required. Conference co-chair, Dr. G.G. Onishchenko stated, “Bringing together a broad range of professionals from governments, non-governmental organizations, science, medicine, and communities of people living with HIV is critical to ensuring a strong and sustained response. The Russian Federation is pleased to be able to host this meeting as a sign of its continuing strong commitment to combating AIDS in Russia, in the region, and globally.”

For three days, conference participants will review regional achievements, share results and focus on addressing the challenge of reducing the impact of the epidemic in the region.

“Eastern Europe and Central Asia is at a critical turning point in the epidemic. There are strong indications of growing leadership and partnership among governments, civil society and communities,” said Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. “However HIV-related stigma and discrimination continues to hamper HIV prevention efforts in the region and renewed political action is needed if real progress is to be achieved.”

-more-

## **The HIV Epidemic in Eastern Europe and Central Asia: At a Crossroad**

Over the last decade, efforts to fight and treat HIV and AIDS have started to have a positive impact. According to the *AIDS Epidemic Update Report* released in December 2007 by UNAIDS and the World Health Organization, the estimated number of new HIV infections in the region fell from 230,000 in 2001 to 150,000 in 2007. But while the pace of the epidemic has slowed compared to 2000, the number of people living with HIV throughout the region continues to grow. Also, annual numbers of HIV diagnoses newly reported in 2006-2007 show an increase compared to previous years in Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

“Knowing the epidemic and better understanding the most vulnerable and affected populations will be the key to better targeting interventions, increasing effectiveness and sustaining existing momentum,” said Michel Kazatchkine, the executive director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. “We have a strong and growing momentum behind the response. However, we face new challenges as many countries transition programs from external to national funding.”

Civil society organizations have played a critical role throughout the region in reaching those most affected by HIV and accelerating access to and the effectiveness of prevention and treatment programs. Governments have also increased their support. For example, for 2006-2008, the Russian Federation provided \$24 million to civil society organizations working in the area of HIV in addition to more than \$800 million directed to other prevention, treatment and care programs and established the Governmental commission on HIV/AIDS, which includes civil society representatives and people living with HIV. In Ukraine, the president established a new National Coordination Council on HIV/AIDS, TB and Drug Addiction, which he personally chairs and civil society has been working in close collaboration with government to scale up access to voluntary counseling and testing. In Armenia harm reduction programs for injecting drug users have been implemented in partnership with civil society and now cover 60% of the targeted population and in Kazakhstan the National Program on Fighting the AIDS epidemic has been effective in providing antiretroviral therapy to 60% of those in need.

“The International AIDS Society welcomes the strong commitment of the governments across Eastern Europe and Central Asia to tackling HIV,” said Craig McClure, Executive Director, International AIDS Society. “Throughout the region many countries are in a state of economic and social transition. The evidence clearly shows that these conditions can increase vulnerability to HIV and it is therefore timely for governments to step up their commitment to the AIDS response.”

The conference will examine how current momentum can be sustained in the context of an expected decline in external funding, as well as the effects that this may have on the efforts of governments and NGOs, who have pioneered many life-saving initiatives, often with the help of external funding.

### **The Changing Face of HIV in the Region**

EECAAC II will also explore three current trends in the epidemic's spread that have significant and new implications for the region:

- The feminization of the epidemic: the epidemic is affecting a greater number of women. In 2006, women accounted for about 40 percent of reported new cases.
- Young people are bearing the brunt of the epidemic: in a region already facing demographic challenges, more than 75 percent of people living with HIV in the region are under the age of 30.
- Increasing heterosexual transmission: 37 percent of reported new cases are a result of unprotected heterosexual intercourse.

The issues, ideas and solutions discussed during EECAAC II will help to improve the joint regional response to the epidemic and inform and contribute to other major AIDS conferences in 2008, including the United Nations General Assembly High Level Meeting on AIDS in New York in June and the XVII International AIDS Conference in Mexico City in August.

For more information, please visit [www.eecaac.org](http://www.eecaac.org)

#### Contact

UNAIDS Geneva | tel. +41 22 791 5587 | [communications@unaids.org](mailto:communications@unaids.org)