



Press release

AIDS EPIDEMIC POSES SERIOUS THREAT TO STABILITY IN EUROPE

UNAIDS AND WHO CALL ON GOVERNMENTS TO TURN POLICY INTO ACTION

Vilnius, Lithuania, 16 September 2004 – With more than 1.8 million people living with HIV in Europe and Central Asia, the epidemic poses a serious threat to the region's social and economic stability, according to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the World Health Organization (WHO). UNAIDS and WHO therefore urge European governments to turn strategy into integrated HIV prevention and treatment programmes to save the lives of thousands of people.

"Countries of the newly enlarged European Union now have a prime opportunity to convert their commitment into concrete action and programmes against AIDS. Building effective partnerships is key to make a significant and sustainable contribution towards proactively addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Europe," said Dr Jack Chow, WHO's Assistant Director-General, HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, ahead of the opening of a European Ministerial conference on AIDS hosted by the Government of Lithuania and the European Commission. The conference, entitled "Europe and HIV/AIDS: New Challenges, New Opportunities", is being held from 16-17 September 2004 in Vilnius.

In Western Europe, deaths from AIDS have declined due to the availability of HIV treatment. Alarming, AIDS infection rates have continued to rise because of waning government commitments to prevention efforts and treatment complacency. The number of people living with HIV rose from 540 000 in 2001 to 580,000 by end 2003. Some of the highest infection rates in the world are in Eastern Europe, primarily in Estonia, Latvia, the Russian Federation and Ukraine where the epidemic continues to spread unchecked. HIV infections in Russia have jumped from 530 000 in 2001 to 860 000 just two years later. HIV threatens to spread relentlessly in neighbouring countries, including Belarus, Moldova, and Central Asian countries.

"Given that 80% of those infected in Eastern Europe are young people, there is an urgent need for a massive and comprehensive response to reduce the vulnerability of young people and empower them to become active partners in the fight against AIDS," said Lars O. Kallings, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe, who is participating in the conference. "If no action is taken, we will be faced with a larger AIDS epidemic that risks crippling the region's social and economic development and undermining national security."

Prevention is key to halting the growing AIDS epidemic. People need to be educated about the possible impact of risky behavior and have access to condoms, needle exchange programs and substitution therapy. Targeted awareness-raising campaigns should be carried out to inform people about how to protect themselves from HIV. As injecting drug use is the primary driver of HIV transmission in Eastern Europe, information, counseling and treatment should be made readily accessible to drug users to reduce the risk of HIV.

Countering stigma and discrimination is equally essential. Fear, ignorance, prejudice, outdated laws (including the criminalization of drug users), and lack of information about HIV prevention and transmission all fuel the epidemic. The specific needs and challenges faced by vulnerable groups, notably drug users, sexual minorities, migrant populations, sex workers, and prisoners must be addressed comprehensively.

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia, about 15 000 people currently receive antiretroviral therapy out of 120 000 who need it. The high cost of antiretroviral (ARV) drugs is a persistent barrier to accessing antiretrovirals in Eastern Europe. Safe quality drugs must be made available to the increasing number of those who need them at affordable prices.

Cooperation among EU Member States has been critical to containing earlier waves of the epidemic. EU funding for projects led by public health experts and non-governmental organizations has enabled national actors to address the specific challenges faced by vulnerable groups. Thanks in part to Global Fund funding, countries like Moldova, Ukraine and Albania have started treatment in the past six months. More national and European investment is urgently needed in the region. "We would like to support the European Union for their renewed efforts to fight AIDS in Europe, particularly its commitment to assist the most-affected countries in its neighbourhood," said Henning Mikkelsen, UNAIDS' Europe Regional Coordinator, speaking at a press conference in advance of the Ministerial conference.

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