

PUTTING THE SPOTLIGHT BACK ON AIDS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

San Salvador, El Salvador, 11 November 2005 – “A rapid and substantial boost in national, regional and international support for the Latin America and Caribbean region on AIDS is essential to enable the region to get ahead of its diverse epidemics,” said the Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) today.

“The AIDS epidemic in Latin America and the Caribbean suffers from a lack of visibility – particularly for countries in Central America. Commitment to and within the region on AIDS needs to be increased urgently,” said Dr Peter Piot, in a plenary lecture at the Central American Congress of STD/HIV/AIDS (CONCASIDA) and the Latin American and Caribbean Foro on AIDS in El Salvador (8 – 11 November 2005).

Addressing the plenary, Dr Piot underlined the significant strides that have been made in the region to increase access to treatment. But, he added, these gains in treatment access need to be sustained and extended to the whole region. With more people living with HIV than ever in some countries, Dr Piot emphasized the urgent need to simultaneously increase HIV prevention programmes that reach all people at risk of infection, particularly those most marginalized such as men who have sex with men and sex workers.

“The region must revitalize its strategies to reach people most at risk – and they must address the deeper-rooted factors that affect vulnerability, such as social exclusion and inequalities of all kinds,” he said.

In 2004, more than 1.7 million people were living with HIV in Latin America and 240 000 were newly infected. The Central Americas is particularly hard hit – two countries in the Central American region—Guatemala and Honduras—have national adult HIV prevalence rates of over 1%. With average adult HIV prevalence of 2%, the Caribbean is the second-most affected region in the world after sub-Saharan Africa.

Speaking on the morning prior to the conference closing event – the Central Americas Presidential Summit - Dr Piot urged leaders in the region to renew and reinvigorate their commitments at the highest political level and to agree to specific measures that will translate into concrete actions to reinforce AIDS responses nationally and regionally.

“The history of AIDS has shown us that when we are united, people win. Success depends on each of us truly being committed to tackling this exceptional crisis,” said Dr Piot.