



Press release

YOUTH LEADERS JOIN FORCES TO FIGHT AIDS IN INDIA

Over 3,000 youth leaders from 500 districts to attend national Youth Parliament; Political leadership needed at all levels to fight AIDS

New Delhi, 5 November 2004 - A two-day 'National Student and Youth Parliament Special Session on HIV/AIDS' will bring together 3,000 student and youth leaders from 500 districts across the country to deliberate and present to the Government their recommendations on the draft law on HIV/AIDS. Representatives of student unions, universities, bodies such as the Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (NYKS), National Service Scheme (NSS), and rural youth will participate in the event.

The youth gathering, being held in New Delhi from 6-7 November 2004, is organized by the Parliamentary Forum on HIV/AIDS (PFA) with support from India's National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Department of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Human Resource Development and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Civil society organizations including the Lawyers' Collective, Population Foundation of India and Mamta are also involved in the Youth Convention.

Speaking about the event, Oscar Fernandes, Convenor, PFA, said: "We have organized this event to enable the students and youth representatives to have a national debate on the legislation on AIDS. The involvement of young people in framing the law is critical."

The PFA has active participation from senior parliamentarians and various political leaders, including Dr R Senthil (PMK), Sarla Maheshwari (CPM), Kirit Somaiya (BJP), Rajiv Ranjan Singh (JDU), Paban Singh Ghatowar (INC).

With over 35 per cent of all reported AIDS cases in India occurring in the 15-24 age group, all stakeholders recognize that mobilizing and partnering with young people is critical. The PFA, in its 2003 Declaration, has committed to "take steps to ensure that the response has a concerted focus on youth". Reaffirming this, Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss, the Minister of Health and Family Welfare said that: "HIV/AIDS is one of the major challenges to human existence. Youth are the most vulnerable, hence should be motivated to fight against AIDS and once motivated they will be great fighters. This Youth Parliament is highly commendable as it is aiming at training young people to be ambassadors in the fight against HIV/AIDS."

Lauding and supporting this national effort to strengthen the leadership of young people, Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, congratulated the government for demonstrating its commitment to the issue. "India's 200 million young people must be protected. Today's young generation has not known a world without AIDS and there is no solution to the epidemic without their active involvement in the response," he said.

Since its launch in 2003, the PFA has been actively involved in strengthening the Forum at every level from the State to the Panchayat, to mobilize communities to respond to the growing challenge of AIDS. The youth convention is a concrete initiative that brings together elected representatives and student leaders on a shared platform. According to Mr. J.D. Seelam, Core Group Member, PFA, and chief organizer for the event, "The uniqueness of the endeavour is that for the first time such a large number of youth leaders representing diverse affiliations, associations, universities, government and civil society organizations, are coming together." "This has made 'India leads the way' a reality," he said, referring to the title of the special session on India at the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok earlier this year.

Data from across the world shows that young people are highly vulnerable to HIV infection. Almost half of all new infections occur in the 15-24 age group. At the same time, young people also hold the key to prevention and to controlling spread of the virus. Dr Piot of UNAIDS, said: "AIDS is an exceptional crisis demanding an exceptional response. It particularly needs the leadership of the young who are most at risk. We have a role in making sure all young people have access to accurate and timely information and services. Young women need equal access to educational and economic opportunities." Recognizing the concern, about 180 youth participants were trained on AIDS issues, including vulnerabilities and linkages around HIV prevention, impact, care, and human rights.

Dr. Mohammed Shaffi, President, IMA (Kerala) students wing, said, "My expectation from this forum is that a law will be formulated to deal with the HIV/AIDS scenario in India. If there is a law that protects everyone, more and more people will come forward to address the issue."

Rajeshwari, M.A. Anthropology student from Pondicherry, said, "At the moment the NGO I am with is only working in the educational field but from next year we are also going to be working on HIV/AIDS. The information and training I receive here will be useful then."

For more information, please contact Rizwan Parwez, cell 93130 35959, 98104 15066, tel 011-51600905, or Padmini Krishnan, tel 011-26018564, 26013257