

UNHCR BECOMES TENTH COSPONSOR OF UNAIDS

HIV prevention central to protecting refugees

Geneva, 25 June 2004 – Today the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) is pleased to announce that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has joined UNAIDS as the tenth Cosponsor. Together with the nine existing Cosponsors, UNHCR will help broaden and strengthen the UN's response to the global AIDS epidemic.

UNHCR is at the forefront of combating HIV among a particularly vulnerable population. Refugees are at risk of infection as wars and conflicts expose them to poverty, family disintegration, social disruption and increased sexual violence – stark realities for many. UNHCR recognises that HIV prevention is central to the overall protection of refugees.

Working in 120 countries and serving some 17 million people, UNHCR is implementing its strategic plan on AIDS and Refugees (2002-2004) and has created an HIV/AIDS unit. During the past two years, its programmes have been improved and become more comprehensive in such areas as voluntary counselling and testing as well as prevention of mother-to-child-transmission. The agency is also committed to reducing the stigma and discrimination refugees can face as they are sometimes blamed for spreading the virus. This is despite the fact that HIV prevalence in refugee populations is often lower than that of the surrounding host community.

“UNHCR is absolutely vital in the fight against HIV,” said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS. “Ensuring that refugees benefit from effective prevention efforts means that traumatised people who have had to flee their homes can avoid the further devastation of AIDS.”

To date, refugees have often been ignored in host countries' HIV programmes. Together with UNAIDS, UNHCR believes that reaching these marginalised people is essential to any successful national AIDS strategy. They must be targeted in policies and interventions, including the provision of antiretroviral therapy. “Host countries should stop excluding refugees from their AIDS programmes. It is highly discriminatory and totally counter-productive,” said Ruud Lubbers, the High Commissioner for Refugees. “These individuals have been neglected for too long.”

UNHCR's added value is its vast experience and active presence in many of the world's conflict zones, reaching out to the poor and neglected in areas ravaged by war, upheaval and AIDS. UNHCR's expertise is invaluable in developing and managing responses to the epidemic in complex humanitarian situations.

UNAIDS and UNHCR are already collaborating in regional crisis contexts such as the Great Lakes Region in Africa and in the Horn of Africa. Both agencies are working together to produce tools and guidelines for coordinated action against HIV. Such cooperation will be deepened in future as UNHCR is welcomed as the tenth UNAIDS Cosponsor.

For more information, please contact Dominique De Santis, UNAIDS, Geneva, (+41 22) 791 4509, or Paul Spiegel, UNHCR, Geneva (+41 22) 739 8289. You may visit the UNAIDS website, www.unaids.org, for more information about the programme. For more information on UNHCR's HIV/AIDS activities, visit www.unhcr.ch/hiv-aids.