Billion dollar march demands action

By Juliana Omale, Nawaal Deane and Antonnette Miday

Stealing the thunder from the official opening of the IAC yesterday, AIDS activists took to the streets to demand that governments and multilateral agencies deliver on their promises to provide access to treatment, prevention and care.

The local and international protesters carried a forest of banners and placards demanding action to translate the conference theme into meaningful change for the 38 million people living with HIV/AIDS.

Zackie Achmat, head of the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa said that the conference should push forward the WHO’s “three by five” targets – getting three million people on treatment by 2005.

Among their concerns is that by 2005 the annual costs of fighting AIDS is estimated at $12 billion, rising to $20 billion by 2007. But this money does not appear to be forthcoming from the donor countries, especially the US (see also centre spread on page four and five).

The protesters caused a traffic snarl-up in the vicinity of the conference venue as they chanted: “Medicine for every nation!” and “Where is the Bill?” This was in reference to the broken promises of world leaders to support the Global Fund.

The protesters slammed President George Bush’s bilateral AIDS plan, saying the $15 billion President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) “will override country driven strategies in favour of treatment and prevention plans that pander to conservative religious special interests and to a powerful American pharmaceutical industry lobby.”

Chilean AIDS activist Rodrigo Pascal Ureta expressed fear that the world was no longer safe for people living with HIV/AIDS as long as they were excluded from the very decisions that were made on their behalf: “The power resides with us because our lives belong to ourselves.”

Frika Chia of the Asia Pacific Network Plus added: “Remember that we are human, not numbers,” as she called for free access to treatment for all groups, including drug users.

Earlier, Randall Tobias, head of PEPFAR, came under fire at a press conference after he refused to accept a memorandum from protesters. The US has sent a smaller delegation to this conference than to Barcelona, and has insisted on guarantees about not being heckled at the conference. The protesters handed over the memorandum to Joep Lange, President of the International AIDS Society (IAS) and co-chair who promised to give it to the US delegation.

Tobias insisted that US policy does not limit funding to condoms: “Our prevention programme is on ABC [with condoms] when it is appropriate in high risk sexual behaviour.” He added that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has no policy with regard to which drugs to use as long as they meet the standards. But this process is a long and tedious one.

“The essential drugs lists of the World Health Organisation (WHO) have been good enough for other diseases, so why are they calling for far greater access,” he told GEM News.

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Mon. 12th July 2004

Colour, candles, light?
By Nawaal Deane

An elephant extravaganza, graceful Thai dancers, a tearful candlelight memorial ceremony and haute courrier condom dresses punctuated the opening of the 15th IAC.

Asia’s first international Aids conference has brought together 17 000 delegates from 160 different countries, the largest of the global AIDS conferences.

The theme of the conference is: “Access for All promotes access in all sectors, especially for expansion of anti-retroviral treatment and prevention.”

A new component of the conference is the focus on leadership. Everyone from international movie stars, to Nelson Mandela, former South African president, civil society, faith based and People Living with Aids (PLWA) leaders will link in satellite sessions called: “Meet the leaders.”

According to Joep Lange, President of the International AIDS Society and co-chair of the conference, the event will hopefully give fruit to more collaboration, better co-ordination and more money.

“Since Barcelona there has been progress, especially the increasing of funds for scaling up treatment, and a new dynamism by WHO [World health Organization] to push for far greater access,” he told GEM News.

Anti-retroviral treatment for developing countries had been shown to be possible. Anti-retroviral drug prices have dropped by 200 percent since the campaign for access to treatment began.

Lange said key issues during the conference will be generic drugs; human rights and prevention programmes focused on drug users and men who have sex with men.

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The 15th IAC gets underway today with a focus on resources and accountability.

The question that once more begs an answer is: why is it that this pandemic has been around for twenty years, is still spiraling upwards, despite the increasing awareness and resources devoted to fighting it.

Peter Piot, head of UNAIDS, said the Bangkok conference sees the struggle against the pandemic enter “a new phase” with “the political, technical and financial resources” starting to move. But he added that there is need to move from “thousands to trillions” of dollars to stem the unrelenting tide.

The Global Alliance of People Living with HIV/AIDS adds that while our knowledge of what works to fight HIV/AIDS is now high, the available resources to implement programmes remain obstructively low.

UNAIDS is calling for the global funding allocated to the fight against HIV/AIDS to grow from US$ 5 billion in 2003 to US$ 20 billion by 2007 (see also pages four and five). But a report by the Global Alliance estimates that at least US$ 10 billion is needed annually to fuel a serious attempt by the international community to reduce the spread of HIV and deal with its consequences.

The Global Fund, a 30 month-old UN brainchild, this week ended its first progress
By Janine Morna

Dressing up against AIDS

Adriana Bertini’s exhibition, *Vista-se contra a AIDS*, gives a new meaning to wearing a condom. After displaying figurines at the 14th International AIDS Conference in Barcelona, Bertini is here with a collection of colourful condom suits and dresses.

But the focus of her art is not fashion. Her message is simple: by asking whether we can wear condom garments, we are also subconsciously asking whether we should wear condoms during sex.

On her poster she writes that “it is fundamental to demystify the condom.” She says that her art is a “transforming agent for behaviour”. It is an innovative tool for raising awareness, promoting debate and fighting the stigma of condom usage.

Bertini’s involvement in HIV/AIDS began with a local Brazilian AIDS organisation. She began experimenting with raw materials after receiving a box of 144 expired condoms.

At first she made customised T-shirts, but the complexity and volume of her art increased as media attention grew. Realising the potential of her work, Bertini enrolled in public health classes and started her own behavioural research.

Her travels took her all over Brazil, where she visited and volunteered for numerous social projects. Her pieces are made up of 750 to 80,000 condoms and all sell at $500. She works alone for up to 17 hours a day with some designs taking as long as six months to complete. Most of her designs use the “col-lage” technique, where she combines open condoms with closed and cut ones.

Bertini’s log book reflects a positive and emphatic response from conference participants. But she has had difficult moments too. Once, on the metro in Brazil, a woman saw her bag made from condoms and asked if she was a sex worker. Although Bertini is not, she calmly replied that she was. She said that by using condoms during sex she knew she did not have AIDS.

Bertini has no financial support and hopes to sell all her dresses, as she cannot afford to take them back with her to Brazil. So far, she has sold one dress. Her talents extend to a range of other products such as frames, utilites and sculptures. She hopes to tackle other themes like cancer, tuberculosis and hunger.

By Betty Oyugi

No to ABC of HIV

Reproductive health campaigners are calling for a fresh definition of the “abstain, be faithful and use a condom” or ABC public health formula for HIV/AIDS to make it relevant.

Speakers at a forum organised by Ford Foundation yesterday to discuss sexuality and HIV/AIDS said ABC should stand for “acknowledging sex and sexuality, realistic provide choice.”

The speakers, all experts in reproductive health, said discussing sexuality openly could reduce new infections of HIV/AIDS. They called for an understanding of sexual cultures, feelings, obligations and desires.

Susan Kippax of the University of South Wales, Australia, says sex cannot be separated from HIV/AIDS. She adds that talking about sexuality is a matter of justice and human rights. Youth should be involved in helping to demystify sex through traditional social cultural norms, the campaigners said.

Salim Mohamed, a project officer at an NGO called Caro-lina in Kibera (Nairobi, Kenya), said interventions that fail to address sexuality “are easily reversed by the unyielding spread of HIV/AIDS”.

By Nonqaba Msimang

Towels, tools and trade

Did you wonder what the item in the skills building programme called “Whoo-i- gami, sex work peer education and the art of towel rolling, folding and shaping” might be about?

Go no further than the prominent exhibition stand in Hall 2/C to meet members of the Debby Doesn’t Do It For Free organisation from Australia who are here to declare that they have reduced the rate of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS by making condoms an attractive part of the “sexual experience.”

“Every sex worker folds towels differently,” explains R.T. Choke. “It leads to the client’s relaxation and to the practic- ing of safe sex.” Rolled inside the towels are condoms. By making it all part of a sexy package, men who generally don’t like to use condoms – see them in a different light.

“Because in Australia peer education is the model of service delivery, there are lower rates of Sexually Transmitted Diseases through sex work,” says Janelle Fawkes.

She said sex workers in Aus-tralia have developed ways of sharing information in nego-tiating safe sex with clients.

“We are a sex worker-run and driven organisation and we develop safe sex working practice.”

Debbies – as they are popu-larly known in Australia – is a sex worker and theatrical ac-tress whose favourite charac-ter is Mr. Big Pants.

“Politicians think they will win people’s vote when they push the whole health issue to sex workers. It is difficult to look after your health if some-one takes away your human rights. We are professional about the health of our clients. Are politicians professional about the health of their community?”

In Australia, only New South Wales had decriminalised sex work...

Queer R.T. Choke notes that the inability to negotiate safe sex is responsible for the vulner-ability of many married women to HIV/AIDS and STDs. She maintains that “sex workers can teach married women a lot about condom usage. That is why they are in the conference to share their skills... Folding towels creatively is a tool of their trade.”
Asia under the spotlight

Rosemary Okello

By bringing 15th IAC to Bangkok, the organisers are literally turning the spotlight on a hot spot. Like Africa, Asia is badly ravaged by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, with 7.4 million people living with HIV. The only difference is that epidemics in Asia are mainly concentrated among injecting drug users, men who have sex with men, sex workers, their clients and partners. According to the President of the International AIDS Society and co-chair of the conference, Mr Joep Lange, Asia is potentially a minefield ready to explode because of its high population. But he is optimistic:

"Bangkok is a watershed in the fight against HIV/AIDS and Asia still has the opportunity to prevent the epidemic. That is why the conference is being held in Bangkok." Thailand is often cited as a country where the national effort against HIV/AIDS has been highly successful. The 100 percent condom programme that promotes use of condoms in commercial and casual sex contacts changed levels of risk behaviour and brought the country's HIV/AIDS epidemic to heel in the 1990s.

Now, figures suggest that the main cause of HIV/AIDS infections is coming to rest between spouses. Monitoring the AIDS Pandemic (MAP) network of organisations predicts that an "African-style" epidemic could soon unfold on the world's most populous continent.

The report: AIDS in Asia. Face the Fact points out that HIV in Asia remains concentrated among those with behaviours that carry a high risk of infection: drug injection, the buying and selling of sex and sex between men.

UNAIDS Executive Director Dr Peter Piot says of the document: "As the report clearly shows, those countries that have chosen to tackle high-risk behaviour openly are beating HIV. Now it is up to others to follow their lead."

In both Asia and Africa, political will to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic is evident. Just as Thailand has become a model for other countries in the region due to its prevention strategy, so are Uganda and Senegal, which have managed to reduce their prevalence rates to below five percent.

Holding the conference in Thailand helps to focus attention on the emerging challenges in the war against HIV/AIDS. As Lange says: "The conference has brought together the various stakeholders which make the three pillars in the fight against HIV/AIDS: Science, communities and leadership. These three are essential in the fight against HIV/AIDS."

Welcome to the City of Angels

By Juliana Omale

The map of Bangkok in the welcome pack you received on your arrival at the airport says it all: the theme "access for all" includes ensuring that 17,000 delegates from 160 countries do not miss out on the joys of Bangkok.

"Welcome to the land of smiles, in the magnificent City of Angels. This city is more than 200 years old. Follow your heart, enjoy the experience." Here are a few useful tips culled from the tonnes of printed information that is available to all and from the living wisdom of delegates and hosts alike.

Transport: The BTS Sky train has got to be the fastest way to travel in Bangkok. Unfortunately it does not go to the Impact Arena. Exhibition and Convention Centre. A shuttle bus connects Victory Monument station to Impact Arena and between BTS Mo Chit Station and Impact Arena.

Your best bet is a metered taxi. Toll charges on the expressway way are paid by the passenger. The tuk tuk, for those who have sense of adventure, and those who do not mind a detour enroute to their destination - either through discount jewelry stores or one of hundreds of tailor shops in downtown Bangkok. The tuk tuk operator gets a bonus coupon entitling him to five litres of fuel! If you are like me, you would get on the shuttle buses which started operating yesterday. It's a FREE service.

What to wear: Keep it light and loose, cotton or any fabric that tends not to stick after humidity. Nevertheless carry a shawl or light jacket: All the rooms within the conference venue are COLD. Oh, and get yourself an umbrella, this is the rainy season.

Shopping: The Thai people are infamous for their willingness to bargain which is part of the fun. Shopping is available both day and night. The norm in department stores is fixed prices. The brochures recommend that you turn on the charm everywhere else. Try patience and a good sense of humour to bring down the price by between 10 and 40 percent of the original price.

Night life: Unlimited choices. You decide. Patpong market is the sex lane between 10 and 40 percent. The venerable Bangkok Market is the sex lane 20 years ago. Try your hands at "a" and "b" services for a fixed price.

Definitely a truly Thai experience, but don't forget that condom in your conference pack. Bars and a good spot to drink an ice cold Singha beer can be found literally on any street. Try going to a table on the road and just hang out with the locals. Far better experience than sitting in a stiff bar you could find in any part of the world.
At last African leaders march from the front

By Arthur Okwemba

Africawhole has had a sad history of leaders delaying the implementation of national policies, laws and strategies to combat HIV/AIDS, treatment and care. Thirty-eight of these have integrated HIV/AIDS programmes into their primary health care systems. And in 26 of these countries, the government organisations tasked with dealing with HIV/AIDS are located in the President’s office. Meaning they enjoy the political support of the head of state.

According to the UNAIDS 2004 report, of the 7.3 million people on ARV drugs worldwide, 25 million people, or two-thirds of the total, are from Africa. Leadership is featuring as a theme for the first time at the global AIDS conference. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan the note he wrote to be said at the opening ceremony last night that “we need leaders everywhere that are committed to making the choice.”

Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, and Uganda’s President Yoweri Museveni will be addressing the conference. Reports indicate the 9th meeting of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) 10 years ago that ICPD African states have got in place national policies, laws and strategic guidelines to combat HIV/AIDS, treatment and care. Thirty-eight of these have integrated HIV/AIDS programmes into their primary health care systems. And in 26 of these countries, the government organisations tasked with dealing with HIV/AIDS are located in the President’s office. Meaning they enjoy the political support of the head of state.

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Resources for children should go to children

By Emily Nwankwo

The theme of the 15th International AIDS Conference is “Access for All”. The conference includes a strong emphasis on youth and leadership. The UNAIDS 2004 report on the global AIDS epidemic states that “prevention is the mainstay of the response to AIDS, but it is seldom implemented at a scale that would turn the tide of the epidemic”.

Young people account for at least half of the new HIV infections. But the actions and interventions for young people hardly seem to reach them early enough to have the intended impact. This could be due to the fact that access by youth is limited by their legal status as minors. These rights are administered and controlled by parents and guardians who more often than not are reluctant to have children exposed to the intimate details of sexual and reproductive health and rights. The consequent ignorance leads them to unsafe behaviour and unintended risk to exposure to infections.

Orphans and vulnerable children are at even greater disadvantage due to the absence of a parent or guardian to broker their rights. Often these children are found in child-headed households, presenting a clearly disempowered existence except by intervention of social workers, good samaritans within their communities or well wishers. Although young people have varying challenges dependent upon their geographical location, there is need to recognize their universal need for access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, including voluntary counseling and testing and anti-retroviral drugs for those infected.

Where a child has no right to seek information, care, services or therapy without the consent of a responsible adult, he or she remains compromised by social circumstances beyond his or her control. It is expected that adults will protect these children. But often these adults are themselves ignorant of the facts. This is more serious today with the advent of anti-retroviral therapy and voluntary counseling and testing. Traditional knowledge on HIV/AIDS has been surpassed by new discoveries in diagnosis and treatment of opportunistic diseases and suppressing the effect of the virus to those who are infected. A new level of education on HIV/AIDS must now be attained to contain the spread of the virus. In basic terms we are beyond the ABCs of HIV/AIDS. We must urgently add D and E – diagnosis and education of ART and nutrition to be fully current and keep pace with the technological and scientific advancements.

Thai NGOs say many members of the community have been excluded from the conference, because of the high conference fees. Two thirds of those living with HIV/AIDS are in Africa, and sixty percent of these are women. What proportion of this constituency have found its way to the conference? It’s worrying when of the thirteen speakers at the opening press conference, only three are women and only one is a black woman. This is not a negative comment on any one of the fine individuals who have been leading the fight against HIV/AIDS. But it is a comment on access. The truth is that some are still more equal than others. How else does one explain the disproportionate number of PWA in Africa, the prevalence of the pandemic among women and the fact that only three percent of Africans needing ARVs are getting them?

The issue here is not just access to resources. It is access to equality. That is something bigger than the biggest fund that will ever be imagined in Bangkok. Welcome to the real challenges.