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World AIDS Day: human rights central to battle against AIDS

"Human rights standards are not an optional extra but central to the battle against AIDS," Amnesty International said today, World Aids Day.

"Social exclusion, economic deprivation and discrimination are integrally linked to HIV/AIDS."

"Those who are on the social margins of society, who are denied access to their most basic human rights -- to freedom from discrimination, to education, to physical integrity, to health care and to economic security -- are the most vulnerable to HIV infection."

"Once it is known or suspected that they are infected with HIV they may be stigmatised, subjected to ill-treatment, denied entry into foreign countries, rejected by the social service and health care systems or denied housing and employment."

"The fear of such discrimination may in turn discourage them from disclosing their status or seeking treatment, thus exacerbating the impact of the disease," Amnesty International added.

Governments must take steps to encourage good health practice and to overcome public prejudice, misinformation and discrimination. There remains much ignorance about HIV/AIDS, requiring a huge effort to promote public awareness. One survey in Central Asia showed that a third of young women had not even heard of AIDS -- yet globally the infection rate for women is rising inexorably.

"The relegation of women and girls to inferior status in society makes them particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS by exposing them to unprotected or unwanted sex," the organization said.

Violence against women and girls -- through domestic abuse, sexual slavery, and rape -- puts them at grave risk of infection with HIV, which then triggers further deleterious consequences such as rejection by their family, discrimination by their community, and further violence. The abuse is often compounded by the denial of medical care, including treatment to reduce the risk of transmitting HIV infection to their infants.

Despite the grave nature of the pandemic many governments are unwilling to support preventive education and awareness (particularly to young people), to address the empowerment of women and girls in matters of sexual and reproductive health, or to acknowledge the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, sex workers, and injecting drug users.

Action was agreed by 189 nations in the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS adopted at the

UN Special Session on HIV/AIDS, held in June 2001. The need to implement this Declaration is becoming ever more urgent -- millions of people are currently denied affordable treatment, and will die early deaths, unless the drugs they need can be provided cheaply. The World Trade Organization should not impede attempts by resource-poor countries to develop effective programs to offer anti-HIV medication to their populations.

With 42 million people now living with HIV/AIDS worldwide, political will on the part of governments and the international community to tackle these issues is essential, the organisation concluded.

Background

Among the rights which must be protected in order to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS are:

Right to health

Experience has shown that people can live with HIV/AIDS for an extended time if provided with the material conditions, clear and effective public health information and appropriate medication. In some cases -- prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV and prophylactic treatment of rape survivors, for example -- treatment is very low-cost. There is increasing urgency in addressing the needs of poorer countries to cheap effective long-term medication. In this respect action is needed both by pharmaceutical companies to address the needs of such countries and for increased contributions by developed countries to the Global Fund on AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

Governments must take steps to encourage good health practice and to overcome public prejudice, misinformation and discrimination.

Health care providers, educators and human rights defenders should not be harassed or arbitrarily detained for providing accurate information, advice and treatment.

People should have access to effective and accurate testing while at the same time being protected from coercive and discriminatory testing

Rights to security of the person and freedom from discrimination based on sex or sexual orientation

Women and girls should be protected from sexual violence and be able to negotiate safe sexual conduct with partners.

Governments should address the stigmatisation of men who have sex with men and prejudice which exists against gay men, lesbians and bisexual. Discriminatory laws and practices will impede effective preventative action and health care delivery.

Children's rights

Children are put at risk by the HIV/AIDS pandemic; like adults living with HIV/AIDS, children with HIV infection need access to medication. Moreover, the right of children who have been orphaned by the pandemic to receive appropriate protection and care must be guaranteed. It is estimated that by 2010 there will be 20 million children who have lost one or both parents due to AIDS, the majority in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these children, particularly girls, will be burdened with a parenting role and economic responsibilities. They need protection and support.

Right to work

A person's HIV status should not be used in a discriminatory manner to deprive them of employment. Depriving the person living with HIV/AIDS not only damages the individual but deprives society of a productive worker and fuels continuing prejudice instead of addressing it.

Note: In August 2001 at its International Council Meeting in Dakar, Senegal, Amnesty International delegates voted to allow it to respond to a much broader range of human rights concerns than it has

in the past -- including some abuses of economic, social and cultural rights. Certain issues pertaining to health rights such as many of those raised by the HIV/AIDS pandemic now fall within the organization's mission.

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