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AIDS pandemic is human rights crisis: Amnesty International

The AIDS pandemic is a human rights crisis, declared Amnesty International's Secretary General, Irene Khan, during the closing plenary of the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand.

"The failure to protect the rights and dignity of people is fuelling the pandemic and making it worse."

"Some governments are still looking for a quick fix to HIV, still failing to recognise that human rights violations increase people's vulnerability to infection, and that people living with HIV/AIDS often face grave human rights abuses," said Irene Khan.

"Even with increased funding and commitment in the fight against AIDS, the scale and impact of the pandemic continues to grow because governments have failed to put human rights at the centre of our response."

"Wherever we look, discrimination and inequality are driving the epidemic. Wherever we look, HIV/AIDS exacerbates existing inequality and creates a fatal combination of stigma and neglect."

"This is true for migrant workers, displaced persons and refugees, for minority ethnic communities and indigenous people, for young people and the disabled, for prisoners, sex workers, injecting drug users, sexual minorities and women."

"Gender inequality is driving new infections among women and girls like never before. Sexual violence and rape, violations of women's rights to education, information and property, together with outdated stereotypes and expectations increase women's marginalisation and risk of infection."

In Thailand, state-sanctioned discrimination and harassment of injecting drug users is driving them underground, impeding their access to the services and support they need to minimise the risk of infection.

"But not only does discrimination fuel the epidemic, people with HIV face significant and ongoing violations of their rights," said Irene Khan.

Referring to an urgent appeal launched by Amnesty International two days ago, Irene Khan called on conference delegates to demand that the Chinese authorities immediately release four HIV positive people who were detained in Henan province after protesting at inadequate healthcare and other services.

Among the four were a mother and father who were protesting at the closure of their children's school, which was set up for pupils whose parents were HIV positive or who had died of AIDS. The school was shut down after the founder told authorities he was going to attend the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok.

"The protection and promotion of human rights is essential if we have any hope of preventing HIV and minimising the impact of the disease," said Ms Khan.

During her speech Irene Khan called on governments to put human rights at the heart of their responses to HIV/AIDS by:

clearly recognising their responsibilities for the protection, promotion and fulfilment of human rights;
initiating legal reform to ensure equal access and non-discrimination;
creating a supportive environment for vulnerable groups and people living with the virus.

"In the human rights field we know how frequently governments avoid responsibility and escape accountability because there is no clear indication of who, where and how they are to implement their human rights commitments," said Ms Khan.

"Whilst accessible, appropriate and quality prevention, treatment and care services are vital, without a legal framework that establishes equality, we risk entrenching the very inequalities that are driving the epidemic and worsening its impact."

It is critically important to involve people living with HIV/AIDS and those most affected by it in all aspects of the response to the disease.

"There may not be a quick fix for AIDS, but there is an effective way forward. It requires a sustained commitment to putting human rights at the centre of our response to the disease," said Ms Khan.

"The fight against AIDS, if it is to be successful, must be a fight for the rights and interests of the world's most marginalised people," concluded Ms Khan.

Background

Irene Khan will deliver an address at the closing plenary of the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok at 8:30 am on Friday 15 July 2004. She will also participate in a press conference at the venue at 11.00 am.

Next week she will hold talks with the Royal Thai Government.

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