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***Ideological pandering undermines effective  
response to global AIDS pandemic***

**Canada should send message on  
Bush AIDS policies during state visit**

**Montreal, November 29, 2004 – US President George W. Bush, visiting Canada on the eve of World AIDS Day, should be challenged by Canadian officials to rethink his global AIDS initiative, which is undermining the fight against HIV/AIDS across the world, said the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network today.**

Bush's global AIDS program (the President's Emergency Program for AIDS Relief - PEPFAR) and other White House efforts have pushed sexual abstinence-based programs, repressive approaches to drug use, and favours for multinational drug companies over science-based prevention programs and access to cost-effective generic drugs.

"The White House's policies are a triumph of easy ideological pandering over acting on the clear lessons of effectively fighting AIDS, and they cost lives," said Joanne Csete, Executive Director of the Legal Network.

"Canada should take an active role in championing more sensible approaches that are grounded in respect for human rights and sound public health thinking. The global AIDS epidemic is a crisis that affects us all. We cannot take a hands-off approach when one of the world's most powerful countries is actively pursuing policies that are misguided and counter-productive."

Last week, several national groups fighting HIV/AIDS sent a letter (See: <http://www.aidslaw.ca/new.htm#nov2004>) to Prime Minister Martin outlining examples of how US policies are undermining the global fight against the epidemic, and urging him to take these issues up with US President Bush during his official visit to Ottawa. These groups included the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, Canadian Treatment Action Council (CTAC), Community AIDS Treatment Information Exchange (CATIE), Students Against Global AIDS, and Canada-Africa Partnership Against AIDS.

The Prime Minister recently signaled, during his trip to the South America, that HIV/AIDS could be among the top priorities for his proposed "L-20" group of nations to address. "But such discussions would be ignoring a major problem if they do not challenge the current damaging policies of the US government," said Csete. She cited numerous examples of how the US is undermining global efforts to respond to AIDS.

At the mid-November meeting of the board of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the U.S. pushed for and won a delay in the next round of grants to poor countries – partly because Global Fund grants are often used for the purchase of generic AIDS medicines. This is a setback for realizing the U.N.'s goal of "3 by 5" – 3 million people with AIDS in developing countries getting treatment for their disease by the end of 2005.

“The US’ actions at the Global Fund board meeting should be particularly offensive to the Canadian government, the biggest funder of ‘3 by 5,’” said Csete. “They fly in the face of Canadian initiatives, such as its support for WHO and Bill C-9 that it enacted earlier this year, to increase access to generic drugs for low-income countries.” (See: <http://www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/issues/cts/patent-amend.htm>). Csete added that these US actions are reinforced by efforts of the US around the world to undermine access to generic drugs by providing extended patent protections to multinational drug companies in bilateral and regional “free trade” agreements. She called on the Canadian government to oppose such efforts, including in the ongoing negotiations for an agreement establishing the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

In addition, the 2003 US law that authorized spending on PEPFAR requires that one third of HIV prevention program support go to organizations that tell young people to abstain from sex outside marriage rather than teaching them the basics of HIV prevention. “Studies have repeatedly shown abstinence-only programs to be ineffective in HIV prevention, but they appeal to Bush’s conservative base,” said Csete.

The same law forbids AIDS organizations from receiving US support unless they publicly condemn prostitution. This provision, promoted by the White House, ignores experiences from around the world that shows that sex workers are important agents in the fight against AIDS if governments work with them respectfully. Condemning prostitution undermines organizations of sex workers fighting for their rights, and undermines other organizations’ efforts to work with sex workers.

Bush administration policies also encourage drug users to be dealt with as criminals rather than through public health measures. The White House continues to support measures to limit drug users’ access to syringe exchange, methadone and other opiate substitutes, and other activities with a proven track record in HIV prevention. In contrast, Canada has, after many years of advocacy by community and drug user groups, recently introduced North America’s first safer injection facility to help protect and promote the health of injection drug users in Vancouver’s Downtown East Side.

Csete said, “Canada should urge the US government to abandon its failed ‘war on drugs’ and adopt more pragmatic, health-promoting responses to drug use. And Canada needs to examine its own over-emphasis on enforcing ineffectual drug laws, and should instead invest more in treating drug use as a health issue, rather than a criminal issue.”

**The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network** ([www.aidslaw.ca](http://www.aidslaw.ca)) is a national non-governmental organization dedicated to promoting laws and policies that respect and protect the human rights of people living with, and vulnerable to, HIV/AIDS.