

For immediate release

CIVIL SOCIETY KEY TO DEFEATING AIDS IN CHINA

International groups, global leaders press UNAIDS to convene NGO meeting

TORONTO/NEW YORK, September 27, 2007 — UNAIDS should support Chinese AIDS activists, who face increased government surveillance and intimidation, in their efforts to openly meet and discuss AIDS, human rights and access to legal services, 27 human rights groups, foundations and AIDS organizations from around the globe said today.

In an open letter to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), leading HIV/AIDS experts and advocates are calling attention to the ongoing crackdown on AIDS activists in China, and asking the Chinese government to respect human rights and encourage non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to participate fully in the fight against AIDS. In particular, the letter calls for a special UN conference to address China's HIV/AIDS challenges.

Those signing the letter include an unprecedented number of Asian AIDS organizations, and such notable global figures as Stephen Lewis, former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, and Mark Heywood, Chair of the UNAIDS Reference Group on HIV and Human Rights.

Over the past two months, the letter says, the Chinese government has repeatedly harassed AIDS activists and disrupted the efforts of AIDS organizations to operate and hold meetings. Chinese police have forced the cancellation of three separate meetings on HIV/AIDS in the cities of Guangzhou (in Guangdong province) and Kaifeng (in Henan province), and also closed the offices of an HIV/AIDS support group in Henan.

Chinese government authorities have also singled out individual activists, detaining 80-year-old physician and AIDS activist Dr. Gao Yaojie, the husband-and-wife team of Hu Jia and Zeng Jinyan, and 2005 Reebok Human Rights Award winner Li Dan.

Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director of UNAIDS, recently acknowledged the importance of civil society groups at the meeting of the World Economic Forum in

Dalian, China, stating that no country in the world had successfully defeated AIDS without giving civil society groups the “space to do their work.”

Joe Amon, director of the HIV/AIDS program at Human Rights Watch, said that UNAIDS’ rhetorical support was not enough. “UNAIDS must act to support not only governments in the fight against AIDS, but also those AIDS activists and organizations who are under fire,” Amon said. “In our letter we are simply asking UNAIDS to convene a meeting of civil society groups in China and ensure their protection.”

Many Chinese AIDS activists fear an increasing crackdown on AIDS groups in the months leading up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Previous high-profile events in China have led to tight constraints on public dissent and the detention of groups considered “undesirable.”

“The spirit of the Olympic Games is inconsistent with the intimidation of AIDS activists, the shuttering of AIDS NGOs, and the harassment of those most at risk,” said Richard Elliott, Executive Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “UNAIDS must make it clear to the Chinese government that a successful fight against AIDS cannot be sacrificed on the altar of the Olympic Games.”

About Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org), the largest human rights organization based in the United States, monitors human rights developments throughout the world. Human Rights Watch’s HIV/AIDS program has been documenting human rights abuses linked to HIV/AIDS since 2001, producing a body of documentation that includes more than 30 reports, hundreds of policy recommendations, and numerous policy briefing papers. By revealing the terrifying range of human rights abuses faced by people living with and affected by the disease, the reports have compelled governments and donors to act on these abuses as part of an effective AIDS response.

About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) promotes the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, and community mobilization. The Legal Network is Canada’s leading advocacy organization working on the legal and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

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Dear Dr. Piot:

As China is increasingly in the global spotlight in the lead-up to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the Chinese government has lost no opportunity to highlight its progressive achievements, including the scaling up of its national response to HIV and AIDS. Recent articles in major journals such as *The Lancet* and positive assessments on the part of United Nations officials have underscored that China is investing in “best practice” programs of HIV prevention, treatment, care and support much more than was the case only a few years ago. This progress is commendable.

But the scale-up of programs is only half the story of China’s response to HIV and AIDS. The other half is a story of repression of AIDS activists and organizations and violation of the rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV. These actions are a violation of key principles on HIV and Human Rights which global leaders, including China, agreed to in the UN Political Declaration of June 2006.

We the undersigned appeal to the leaders of the UNAIDS secretariat and its co-sponsor United Nations agencies to join us in speaking publicly about the events and actions noted here, which undermine whatever positive steps there have been in China’s response to the epidemic. United Nations leadership is needed immediately to urge the Chinese government to cease its repression of members of civil society working to fight AIDS and to actively endorse and support a human rights based response to the AIDS epidemic.

A number of recent actions against the AIDS work of legitimate Chinese NGOs and advocates recall China’s early practices of detention and repression of pioneering civil society leaders earlier in China’s epidemic. Among the actions of greatest concern are the following:

- The NGOs Asia Catalyst and China Orchid AIDS Projects had planned an international conference on HIV/AIDS and the law in Guangzhou in early August. On July 26, the organizations were informed that the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau had instructed the managers of the hotel where the conference was to take place to cancel it. On the same day, national security agents detained Li Dan, director of China Orchid AIDS Project and winner of the 2005 Reebok Human Rights Award for 24 hours. The co-sponsors were informed that the combination of AIDS, law and foreigners was “too sensitive” in a time when the year-long countdown to the Olympics was about to begin.

- The China Network of People Living with HIV and AIDS (Beijing), in collaboration with an organization of people living with HIV/AIDS based in Henan, announced it would hold a meeting on August 19-20 with representatives of 30 organizations of people living with HIV from around the province. On August 14, the police in Kaifeng, where the meeting was to take place, told the group to postpone the meeting indefinitely.
- On August 15, after repeated “visits” to the Kaifeng and Ruanjia village offices of China Orchid AIDS Projects, police ordered both offices to be shut down. They said the offices were illegal, though the organization is legally registered with the government and has worked in Henan for many years. They said that if the office was not closed by noon on August 17, personal harm could come to Zhu Zhaohua, the office director. On the day of the closing, police oversaw the removal of the staff and their belongings and told staff to leave the city “for their own personal safety.” Police also shut down a branch office of China Orchid AIDS Projects in Ruanjia village (Henan), and detained and expelled five student volunteers and a professor from Henan. Both offices provided much-needed support and services to children affected by AIDS.

In addition to these actions, NGOs based in and near Beijing have reported that the mandatory detention period for people charged with drug crimes has been extended in Beijing, and HIV outreach activities aimed at sex workers and men who have sex with men in the Beijing metropolitan area face increasing police scrutiny and harassment.

These repressive actions come as international media have reported stepped-up detentions and harassment of civil society representatives identified with pro-democracy and human rights struggles, as well as tighter state controls to ensure that Chinese mass media portray the country in a positive light. All signs point to a period of repression leading up to the Olympic Games that risks undoing whatever progress may have been made in recent years in China’s response to HIV and AIDS.

Courageous civil society action has been crucial to the progress made on HIV and AIDS everywhere in the world. Senior Chinese officials have acknowledged the importance of civil society in fighting AIDS in the past, but the authorities’ fear of public embarrassment during the Olympics threatens to undo this commitment. Leaders and officials of UNAIDS and the co-sponsor agencies must use all available opportunities to ensure that the Beijing Olympic Games do not become the smokescreen behind which AIDS activists in China are attacked and silenced. Public support from the United Nations and others in the international sphere for the life-saving work of AIDS leaders in Chinese civil society is urgently needed. Praise for China’s important AIDS programs must be accompanied by public statements in favour of the human right of civil society representatives to assemble, express themselves freely and continue their life-saving work. In this regard we call on UNAIDS to support the convening of a civil society conference within China in early 2008 on HIV and human rights.

We, the undersigned, will monitor public statements from UNAIDS and its co-sponsors to Chinese authorities on HIV/AIDS and Chinese civil society in the expectation that UN leaders and officials will not let essential civil society voices be silenced in the struggle for human rights and an effective national response to HIV/AIDS.

Signed,

Accion Ciudadana Contra el SIDA (LACCASO – ACCSI), Venezuela
AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA)

AIDS Law Project

American Anthropological Association, Committee for Human Rights

AP-Rainbow Advocates, Inc.

Asia Catalyst

Asia Pacific Network of people living with HIV/AIDS (APN+)

Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW)

Asian Harm Reduction Network (AHRN)

Association HIVLV, Latvia

Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network

Companions on a journey, Sri-lanka

Coordination of Action Research on AIDS & Mobility (CARAM Asia)

Delhi Network of Positive People (DNP+)

Empower India

European AIDS Treatment Group (EATG)

FrontAIDS

Human Rights Watch

IGAT Hope, Papua New Guinea

International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD vzw)

International Treatment Preparedness coalition (ITPC)

International Treatment Preparedness coalition in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (ITPCru)

Lawyers Collective, India

Levi Strauss Foundation

Manipur Network of Positive People (MNP+), India

Physicians for Human Rights

Positive Malaysian Treatment Access & Advocacy group (MTAAG+)

Individuals

Zackie Achmat, Executive director, Treatment Action Campaign

Mark Heywood, Chair, UNAIDS Reference Group on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights

Stephen Lewis, Co-director, AIDS Free-World, and former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa

Anastasia Agafonova

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Shona Schonning
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