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# News Release

For immediate release

## **RUSSIA AT RISK OF HIV EPIDEMIC HITTING CATASTROPHIC LEVELS**

*Russian drug policy can lead to an additional 5 million people becoming infected in the near future*

**MOSCOW, October 7, 2011** — On October 10–12, 2011, in Moscow, the Russian Government has organized the International Forum “Millennium Development Goal 6 in Eastern Europe and Central Asia”. Representatives from the scientific community, civil society and government will participate in the Forum. Millennium Development Goals are the targets that 193 UN member states, as well as over 20 international organizations, have pledged to reach by 2015. The Millennium Development Goal 6 (MDG 6) aims to slow down and begin to reverse the HIV/AIDS epidemic by the year 2015, including in Russia.

However, today the growth of HIV incidence has not been contained, and in fact HIV incidence continues to grow. By December 31, 2010, 589,581 people with HIV were registered in the Russian Federation, compared to 529,828 people with HIV registered in 2009. Sharing of non-sterile syringes by injecting drug users remains the main route of HIV transmission – over 59.2% of all registered HIV cases, according to the Federal Scientific and Methodological Center for AIDS Prevention and Control. According to the Federal Agency for Drug Control (FSKN), there are estimated 5 million drug users in Russia. **Thus, today 5 million people are under threat of contracting HIV, and in the future the epidemic in Russia could take catastrophic proportions.**

“Clearly, in this situation HIV prevention among drug users must be a priority for Russia”, says **Alexandra Volgina**, activist, person living with HIV; Chair of the charity foundation *Svecha*. “In many countries that had to face drug dependence long before Russia and had similar epidemic situations, **it was possible to significantly reduce HIV spread among drug users by implementing harm reduction programs. These programs include methadone substitution therapy and needle and syringe exchange.** But the current Russian policy denies these methods that are accepted worldwide and recommended by the UN. This denial is not based on evidence.”

The emphasis of the fight against HIV in Russia is on using ineffective prevention measures in the background of repression against drug users and creation of an atmosphere of public intolerance towards people who use drugs. However, global experience shows that the spread of HIV in this group can be reduced also through

changing drug policies to ensure their conformity with public health and human rights principles, and abandoning the repressions.

**“There is an obvious connection between the spread of HIV among drug users and human rights”, says *Mikhail Golichenko, Senior Policy Analyst at the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.* “However, currently the Russian policy reflects quite the opposite of the developed countries’ experience. Repressive Russian drug policy deprives people who use drugs of the right to health and the right to life itself. Harsh law enforcement measures result in drug users going “underground”, contracting infectious diseases, using prescription drugs and mixes and dying from overdoses; enforcement measures also result in the growth of the prison population. Together with a tuberculosis epidemic – at the end of the year 2009 there were 262,718 people with active tuberculosis registered at the Russian TB treatment facilities, – **this makes achieving MDG 6 by 2015 absolutely impossible for Russia.**”**

Here are just some practical examples: the Russian government’s estimated annual expenditures related to drug law enforcement (Articles 228-233 of the Russian Criminal Code) equal **2 billion 878 million 750 thousand rubles, or about 100 million US dollars.** This amount does not include the money spent on detention and imprisonment. To compare, only 20 million US dollars was allocated to HIV and hepatitis B and C prevention among all population groups in 2011. The same amount will be allocated to HIV and hepatitis B and C prevention among all population groups in 2012 and three times less will be allocated in 2013. Considering the context and tendencies in the development of the HIV epidemic in Russia, clearly such policies are not leading to any positive results.

“No money at all is allocated towards HIV prevention among injecting drug users”, says *Anya Sarang, President of the Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice.* “However, at the Moscow Forum on October 10-12 **the Russian Government is planning to take on a leadership role in combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.** If Russia is acknowledged as the regional leader for reaching MDG 6 and its drug policy will continue to be based on repressive measures, then undoubtedly the region will become involved in a new round of mass human rights violations. This would lead to an HIV outbreak, new AIDS-related deaths, overdoses, denial of medical help based on discrimination. At the same time, economic and financial expenses necessary for effective prevention and for reaching MDG-6 will keep growing.”

Currently, a few days prior to the MDG 6 Forum, Russian and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are appealing en masse to the Russian Government. One of these appeals says that «the Moscow MDG 6 Forum, as a magnifying glass, allows seeing these problems and **Russia’s neglect of its own HIV epidemic and of the people who are at the highest risk.**”

“To change the situation, the Russian Government must radically change the useless and expensive methods of combating HIV and the repressive policy towards drug users”, says *Ivan Varentsov from the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network.* “Before the opening of the

MDG 6 Forum we want to call upon the Russian Government to support the necessary prevention programs for those at the highest risk of HIV, including substitution therapy and needle exchange programs. Otherwise, tackling the HIV epidemic and reaching the MDG by 2015 will be impossible.”

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**About the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network:**

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network ([www.aidslaw.ca](http://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.

**About the Harm Reduction International:**

The Harm Reduction International ([www.irha.net](http://www.irha.net)) is one of the leading international non-governmental organisations working in harm reduction and drug policy reform, and is an influential source of research, policy and legal analysis and advocacy. Based in London, Harm Reduction International works to reduce drug related harms by promoting evidence-based public health policy and practices and human rights-based approaches to drug policy through an integrated programme of research, analysis, advocacy and collaboration with civil society partners.

**About the Eurasian Harm Reduction Network:**

The Eurasian Harm Reduction Network (EHRN - [www.harm-reduction.org](http://www.harm-reduction.org)) is a regional network committed to promoting humane, evidence-based harm reduction approaches to drug use, with the aim of improving health and protecting human rights at the individual, community, and societal level.

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