

PRESS RELEASE



Russia: HIV/AIDS Pioneer Fights for Vulnerable Populations *Humanitarian Action Helps Drug users, Street Children*

Montreal, September 9, 2005 — A ground-breaking HIV/AIDS organization, **Humanitarian Action Fund**, has shown that providing outreach and care to Russia's most marginalized populations is the best way to stem the tide of HIV/AIDS, **Human Rights Watch** and the **Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network** said today.

Russia's Humanitarian Action Fund will today be awarded the *2005 Award for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights*. The award is given annually by Human Rights Watch and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network to an individual or organization that has made outstanding contributions to addressing HIV/AIDS and human rights.

“While the Russian government continues to try to sweep its fast-growing HIV/AIDS epidemic under the rug, Humanitarian Action has shown that providing outreach and care to drug users, sex workers and those forgotten by government policy is the most effective response to the epidemic,” said Joseph Amon, HIV/AIDS director for Human Rights Watch.

Humanitarian Action, based in Saint Petersburg, grew out of the programs of the French NGO Doctors of the World, which offered the first HIV prevention programs for vulnerable populations, beginning in 1995, when the government barely acknowledged HIV/AIDS in the country. Since then, Humanitarian Action's programs have served as a model in the country for such programs as syringe exchange for drug users, outreach to street-based sex workers, and medical services for street children.

Heroin injection remains a key driver of HIV/AIDS in Russia, but government policies have been hostile to opiate substitution therapy, a central element of HIV prevention in most countries.

“It is a scandal that use of methadone to treat Russia's thousands of heroin users remains illegal,” said Joanne Csete, executive director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “Humanitarian Action's syringe exchange and other services for drug users are all the more vital in these circumstances.”

The World Health Organization recently decided to include methadone on its widely consulted Essential Drug List.

Russia is home to some of the world's most repressive drug laws. A 2004 Human Rights Watch report [<http://hrw.org/reports/2004/russia0404/russia0404.pdf>] documented police harassment and abuse towards drug users when they try to use the few HIV prevention services that are available. Humanitarian Action was one of the first organizations to advocate for the human rights of drug users in Russia, and one of the first to open a dialogue with the police about the importance of allowing HIV prevention services to operate.

“In many parts of the world, drug users and others who are marginalized from society struggle for access to the most basic information about HIV, as well as prevention services and voluntary, confidential HIV testing.” said Amon. “Humanitarian Action provides a model to be emulated globally.”

***Note to press:** The Director of Humanitarian Action, Alexander (‘Sasha’) Tsekhanovich, will be in New York and Canada to receive the award and meet with local needle exchange programs, government officials, and NGOs working in HIV/AIDS.*

For more information about the *Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights* see: www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/awards.htm

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The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) was founded in 1992 to promote the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, advocacy, and community mobilization. The Network is Canada's leading ~~advocacy organization~~ for legal, ethical and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) is an independent, non-governmental organization that conducts regular, systematic investigations of human rights abuses in about eighty countries around the world. Its reputation for timely, reliable disclosures has made it an essential source of information for those concerned with human rights. Human Rights Watch addresses the human rights practices of governments of all political stripes, of all geopolitical alignments, and of all ethnic and religious persuasions. It defends freedom of thought and expression, due process and equal protection of the law, and a vigorous civil society; it documents and denounces abuses of internationally recognized human rights. Its goal is to hold governments accountable if they transgress the rights of their people. Human Rights Watch began in 1978, and today includes divisions covering Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East as well as three thematic divisions on arms, children's rights, and women's rights, and special programs on business and human rights and HIV/AIDS. The organization maintains offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Moscow, and Tashkent.