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"Diverse Voices, United Action"



Young "key affected populations" call for more attention to enhancing their human rights during the opening plenary session at BEXCO on Saturday.

Prejudice about HIV/AIDS persists

By Song Sang-ho

The plight of people living with HIV/AIDS will never end as long as stigma and discrimination against them continues despite medical advancements in treatment, activists and medical researchers said.

They said that such a social climate increased the vulnerability of what they called "key affected populations," making it even more difficult for them to get access to treatment, care and support.

"People just don't want to take simple medications because they are just sick and tired of (stigma). They are not even able to speak out. Stigma comes from within yourself because you are scared of what the others say," said Asavari Herwadkar, a medical doctor from

Mumbai, India.

"I am in the medical profession, but it is not enough just to give medical (support to them). It is much deeper. It is psychological, social and spiritual. Those factors play bigger roles than medical aspects."

Park Kwang-seo, who leads an activist group called "Love for One," said that AIDS patients feel most hopeless and frustrated when they are rejected by doctors and other healthcare providers, who they believe are the "last ones to fall back on."

Park, 39, established the group to enhance the human rights of those with the disease in 1999 — five years after he himself tested HIV positive.

"People with HIV and AIDS go to hospital, hoping that they would

not face any discrimination still rampant in this society, and that doctors would give them the mental strength to carry on their lives," he said.

"But looking at the doctors being reluctant to treat them, their trust and confidence in them were broken with some refusing to go see their doctors and take antiviral drugs."

Afghan society faces a similar challenge as its 570 HIV-infected people suffer from stigma.

"There are two issues regarding the stigma. One is a religious issue and the other is a cultural one. Religiously, there is no stigma against the problem, but culturally, because they are associated with sexual practices, so that is why they are seen as not very good," said Dr. Sali-

ab Ayubi, health program officer of the Afghanistan Delegation of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

Rev. Michael Schuenemeyer, an executive director of the United Church of Christ HIV & AIDS Network in Ohio, said people should give more "compassionate" attention to HIV patients.

"We should not immediately jump to judgment. Health care, particularly in terms of public health care, has to be done without judgment. That is the first step. And then, it is through the listening of people's stories and responding with compassion. We have to treat ourselves as human beings," he said.

Rev. JP Mokgethi-Heath from

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“Diverse Voices, United Action”

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Campaigners renew calls for active political, civil engagement

By Song Sang-ho

Leaders of regional and global campaigns to fight HIV/AIDS on Saturday urged political leaders, civil societies and other concerned individuals to engage more actively in responding to HIV/AIDS.

Participants at the opening plenary sessions here at BEXCO in Busan had in-depth discussions on how to “get to zero” — zero new HIV infections, discrimination, AIDS-related deaths — and clear legal impediments to remove the stigma the virus brings.

Fiji President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau, a renowned AIDS activist, underscored that most challenges the international community tries to tackle can only be solved through enhanced political governance and responses.

“It is essential for leaders across the region to be more actively engaged if they are to translate regional political commitments into more effective national action through enhancing public policy, strengthening the enabling environment and programming health and social services,” the president said during the opening plenary session.

J.R. Prasada Rao, special advisor to UNAIDS, also reiterated his call for accelerated action from all social levels.

“Asia and the Pacific have the capacity to be the first to achieve the ‘three zeros.’ But now more than ever, this will require bold political leadership, strong country ownership and inclusive partnerships,” he said. “Community involvement is no longer an option but a critical condition to trigger social change and achieve universal access coverage.”



Fiji President Ratu Epeli Nailatikau delivers a speech during the opening plenary session.

should be torn down for high-risk individuals to gain easy, sufficient access to necessary support and care.

“Unless and until we address and remove the legal and policy barriers to accessing services from people who use drugs, investing in harm reduction is tantamount to flushing money down the toilet,” said Kaplan.

“The constant threat of police arrest, violence and incarceration at harm reduction drop-in centers, methadone clinics and other places where people use drugs receive services minimizes the impact of these services.”

The Pacific Session was also held on Saturday. Government officials, scholars and activists shared their views on how to address legal hurdles in achieving universal access to HIV prevention and treatment.

The plenary sessions also enabled voices of young “key affected populations” seen as vulnerable to the HIV infection to be heard.

They presented their leadership and capabilities to play a central role in the HIV response.

“Everyone should focus on strengthening and leveraging our technological capabilities so that we can own and lead the HIV response. We have the energy, knowledge and practical experience, but we need mentors to guide us in honing our capabilities,” Gerard Ompad, head of Youth LEAD, a group of young key affected populations.

“We are not only words on your reports, declarations and documents. We exist and have rights. The question is, are you ready to listen to us and take action?”

Karyn Kaplan, director of policy and development of the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group, emphasized that legal barriers

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South Africa said that discrimination makes things worse for those infected with HIV.

“In South Africa, as an example, in terms of sexuality, marriage between two people of the same sex is legal. But there is within society a great discrimination against people who are lesbian or gay,” he said.

An extreme example of prejudice against homosexuals in conservative societies is that “lesbian women are identified and gang raped by men” who believe women should have sex with men, not women, he

said. Worse, many lesbian women get infected with HIV as a result of such brutal assaults.

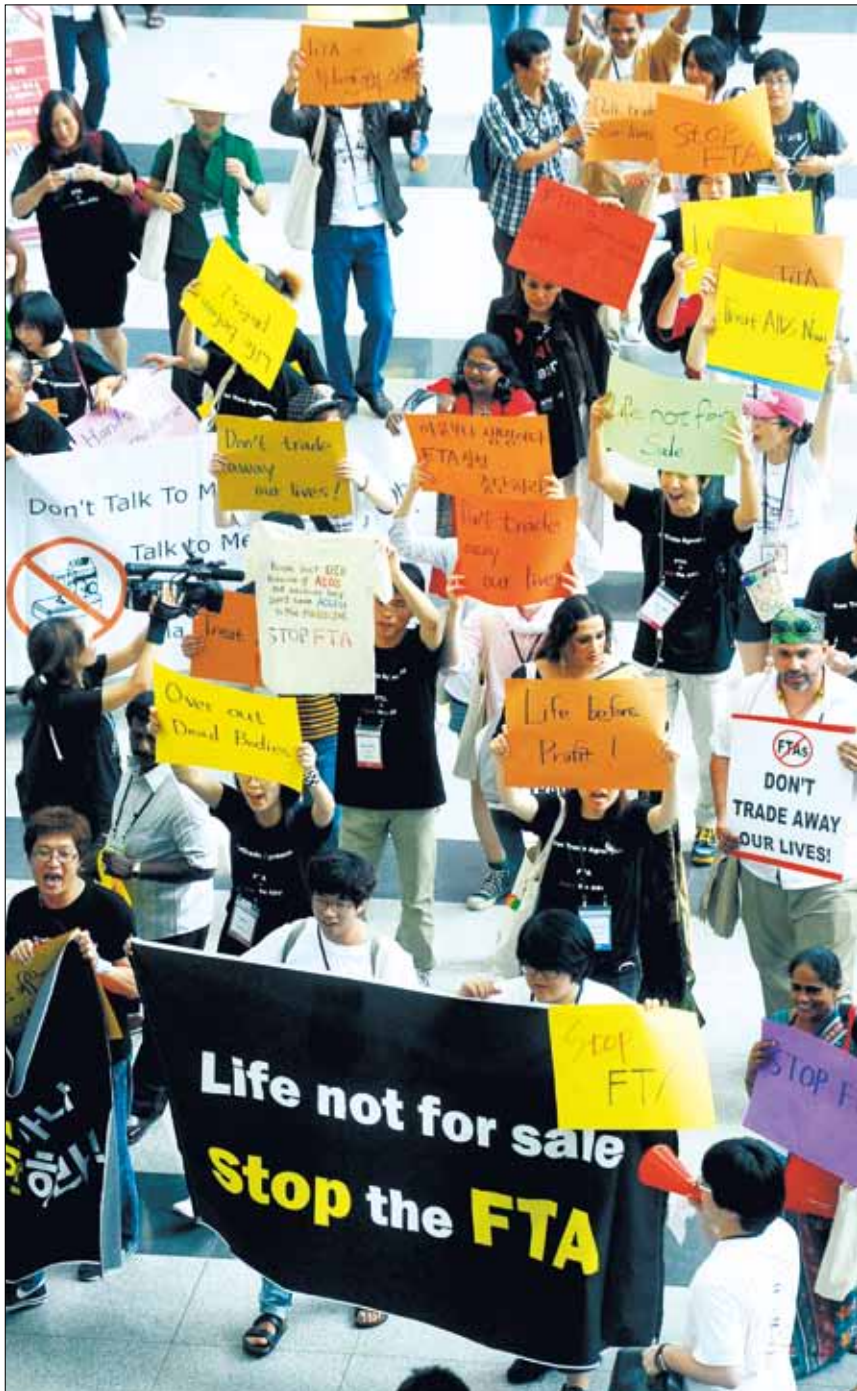
Despite campaigns, the stigma around the disease dies hard with many people still associating AIDS with promiscuous sexual activities and immoral behavior.

“Such prejudices stem from our society’s ignorance of the disease. People do not pay attention to it as they think it only concerns special groups of people such as homosexuals, sex workers, foreigners and those in the poor African states,” said Youn Gabriel, who lives with HIV.

Announcement: Congress Field Trip

The 10th ICAAP Local Organizing Committee is offering a Congress Field Trip for overseas participants from Aug. 29-30, an opportunity to visit local AIDS-related agencies and medical facilities in Busan. The itinerary includes ISHAP Busan, Haeundae-gu Community Health Center and the Busan branch of Korean Alliance to Defeat AIDS. Registration fee is 20,000 won (\$20) per person, including transportation and donations for the institutions. The bus will depart at 1 p.m. during the two-day period, and come back at 6 p.m. Participants are advised to gather at Gate No. 1 by 12:45 p.m. For further information including registration form, please contact Field Trip desk at the Asia Pacific Village.

PHOTO GALLERY



Some ICAAP participants and activists stage an anti-FTA protest.



Nazhats Hameem (left), former high court judge in Fiji, delivers a speech titled "Making the law work for HIV" during the Pacific Session at BEXCO.



An event to introduce the culture of Vietnam at an exhibition hall



Taiwan Asia Pacific Village



A K-pop performance organized by the Korean Red Cross



Mascots promote condom use.



Bangkok Asia Pacific Village

Global Fund backs radical solutions

By John Power

Few organizations have as much influence on the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS as The Global Fund. About 47 percent of all people in low and middle-income countries being treated for HIV are supported by the fund, which has facilitated such treatment for more than 6 million people since its inception in 2002. In Asia, 40 percent of the international funds used in HIV treatment come from The Global Fund.

Christoph Benn, its director of external relations, said the progress made in Asia-Pacific has been immense, but that much remains to do.

"If we start with AIDS treatment, which really wasn't available 10 years ago, now there are 800,000 people on treatment in Asia and 500,000 of those are supported by The Global Fund. But we need now to expand that because currently still only 30 percent of all people who need treatment in Asia have access to it," he told The ICAAP10 Herald in an interview Saturday.

The Global Fund collects money from governments and private institutions to invest in programs to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, but leaves the actual content and running of the programs to governments and charities. But just how that money has been used has caused controversy in the past: The Global Fund itself earlier this year reported the misuse of funds in four countries.

Benn acknowledged the risk but was ada-



Christoph Benn, director of external relations of The Global Fund

mant that the organization has tough safeguards in place against corruption.

"We are working with private sector auditing firms to provide some oversight that we can make sure money is used in the right way; we have a very active inspector general who has a team that goes to certain countries if there are indications of fraud and corruption to follow up on that. Once we have detected fraud and corruption, we don't hesitate to respond," he said.

Calls for the decriminalization of drug use and sex work have been recurrent throughout ICAAP10, and are echoed by The Global

Fund. The heavy hand of the law, it is argued, is hampering efforts to tackle the epidemic.

"There is a strong evidence base that if you criminalize people you drive them underground, they will not come forward, for example, for testing, for treatment, for prevention," he said.

But are such politically explosive goals as decriminalizing drug use and sex work realistic?

"I would say yes. If you look at the history over the last ten years, in many countries the legal environment was very negative and people had their rights disrespected and we saw changes. I would never say, oh, let's not do that because it does not look realistic at this point in time."

Having observer status at the U.N. General Assembly, The Global Fund attended June's High-Level Meeting on AIDS.

"We think the document was very strong in very many aspects," said Benn.

"The nations coming together in New York signing that document fought for increased resources for the fight against AIDS and also for increased resources for The Global Fund so that we can address the epidemic in all regions of the world, but also in Asia, more effectively."

He is hopeful, too, for what ICAAP10 can achieve: "We regard this 10th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific as a very important opportunity to review how far we have come with the response to HIV in this region."

Celebrating AIDS communities, calling for action to 'Get to Zero'

By UNAIDS

ICAAP10 comes at a pivotal moment in the AIDS response. Thirty years into the AIDS epidemic, 2011 also marks 20 years since the creation of the AIDS Society of Asia and the Pacific.

Our global vision is clear: zero new HIV infections. zero discrimination, zero AIDS-related deaths.

Asia and the Pacific has made tremendous progress on AIDS. But the gains seen in the region are fragile and increased, sustained action is critical for future results.

At this critical time, the 10th ICAAP's theme, "Diverse Voices, United Action," is an excellent

metaphor for the challenges of Asia and the Pacific.

AIDS communities of Asia and the Pacific are the driving force for change, and UNAIDS is here at ICAAP10 to share our evidence and knowledge, but also to learn from the vast breadth of experience that will be showcased in Busan — what works, what does not work, what new challenges lie ahead and which obstacles to progress can be overcome.

Last June, world leaders pledged to achieve ambitious goals by 2015, which will move us closer toward our vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. Asia and the Pacific, boosted by the platform of

ICAAP, can lead the world in "Getting to Zero," as will be underlined in UNAIDS' regional report on HIV in Asia and the Pacific, to be launched at ICAAP.

If governments solidly focus on and involve key populations at higher risk in evidence- and rights-based AIDS programming, and if adequate resources are channeled for AIDS from both international and domestic sources, Asia and the Pacific can take leaps toward the elimination of AIDS. Currently, there are still nearly two people getting infected for every person starting treatment, so we are still a long way off, but there are many reasons to be optimistic.

At this 10th ICAAP, we urge participants to keep the pressure on. We are at a crossroads in the AIDS response. Countries in the region, especially middle-income countries, need to vastly increase the domestic spending on HIV programmes to continue recent progress.

ICAAP is a showcase for community-based action. Throughout the entire region, civil society including communities most affected by HIV is transforming the response.

UNAIDS is proud to co-sponsor the Congress. We must seize this historic moment and all opportunities to reach our vision. The beginning of the end of this epidemic is surely within our reach.