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## **SPECIAL EDITION: IV LATIN AMERICAN AND CARIBBEAN FORUM ON HIV/AIDS AND STI**

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Left to right: PAHO Director Mirta Roses, and Ginés García, Minister of Health of Argentina; FORUM participants express their solidarity during the closing ceremony; distribution of materials at the UNAIDS stand.

### **A FORUM for Renewed Hope and New Challenges**

FORUM 2007 was the scene of renewed hope, but also of growing challenges in the history of the HIV epidemic. The presentations and discussions at the Buenos Aires meeting by experts and people living with HIV in Latin America and the Caribbean showed that the most important challenges to be addressed include making universal access a reality for all, guaranteeing the rational use of resources, and containing the epidemic.

These challenges are a collective responsibility in which we all have a role to play through mobilizing resources and/or guaranteeing that the resources are invested in actions that have a positive impact. Thus, we are committed to continuing to join forces to sustain the current response, as well as to expand those efforts, with an emphasis on the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and disease prevention,

improving our understanding of the epidemic, combating stigma and discrimination, and supporting intersectoral collaboration networks by involving other sectors that are still not fully part of this process.

In her speech during the closing ceremony, PAHO Director Mirta Roses made reference to the gaps that persist in the Region and to the imperative need to focus collective and organized efforts on putting an end to the “unfinished health agenda.” Roses called for redoubling efforts to ensure early detection of the infection and to combat the principal constraints to that process, namely stigma and discrimination, that prevent people from recognizing the importance of HIV testing and counseling services.

In view of the meeting of the Central American Congress on STI/HIV/AIDS (CONCASIDA, to be held in November 2007 in Managua) and the next International AIDS Conference (August 2008, Mexico City), the challenges will be to show evidence of progress in meeting the respective challenges discussed in Buenos Aires.

To read the speech by Mirta Roses, go to:

[http://www.paho.org/Spanish/D/FORO\\_SIDA\\_Clausura\\_Apr07.htm](http://www.paho.org/Spanish/D/FORO_SIDA_Clausura_Apr07.htm)

### **Experts Make Recommendations for Universal Access in the Region**

During plenary sessions, groups of experts from such diverse sectors, such as ministries of health, civil society, international cooperation agencies, academia, and people living with HIV held discussions and made proposals that focused on key issues associated with universal access. The recommendations are presented below according to their importance:

1. Structural, political, social, and epidemiological vulnerabilities in Latin America and the Caribbean
  - Craft joint solutions between government and civil society to achieve a concerted social agenda
  - Strengthen the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and disease prevention, as well as the Human Rights of children and adolescents in order to integrate them into the response to HIV in the Region
  - Increase the visibility of vulnerable groups: men who have sex with men, sex workers, transsexuals, lesbians, prisoners who are sexually active, and intravenous drug users
  - Design public policies with a Human Rights perspective in order to guarantee gender identity, reduce stigma and discrimination, and promote harm reduction strategies
  - Strengthen women’s activism and involvement in the response to the epidemic
  - Promote and increase the use of Monitoring and Evaluation as a management tool to monitor the implementation of evidence-based interventions from the beginning
  - Improve epidemiological surveillance systems, integrating civil society in the

processes, including behavioral determinants.

2. Care and treatment within the framework of different Health Systems

- Universal access is not limited merely to providing antiretroviral therapy but includes all actions that facilitate access to a decent quality of life and well-being for people with HIV and their families.
- To ensure universal access, the countries should undertake adequate and credible strategic planning that ensures mobilization of the necessary external and national resources, and they should put mechanisms for timely monitoring in place.
- According to financial estimates that measure spending on AIDS, Latin America and the Caribbean have maintained a stable level of expenditure during the past five years, with a large increase in spending assumed by governments, a reduction in funding from bilateral agencies, and a modest increase in funding from multilateral agencies.
- It is necessary to continue pressuring researchers and laboratories to develop adequate, accessible pediatric formulations.
- The use of generic drugs will contribute to universal access. Since there are no reports to date that show the difference in the effectiveness of generic drugs compared with brand-name drugs, it is necessary to ensure the quality of generics by conducting bioequivalence and bioavailability studies and by insisting on good manufacturing practices.
- It is indispensable that work be carried out jointly among the Latin American and Caribbean countries, since this will be the only way to meet the universal access objectives to which the countries have committed.

3. International and regional cooperation and initiatives to halt the spread of the epidemic

- Sustaining compliance with the agreements, declarations, and commitments assumed by the countries, despite changes in governmental authorities, is a priority.
- There are differences in the data generated by governments and civil society in the UNGASS reports, and there is some question about civil society's participation in these reports.
- Reviewing the eligibility criteria for access to the Global Fund is considered fundamental for financing in the middle-income countries of the Region.
- Strengthening Civil Society participation in the Country Coordinating Mechanisms in order to achieve greater effectiveness and transparency in their management.
- The financing of national plans of action should be ensured to facilitate their technical, political, and financial sustainability.
- Efforts should be made to advocate regionally the lowering of the cost of antiretroviral drugs.

4. New promotion and prevention mechanisms in the Latin American and Caribbean context

- Promote universal access to prevention as a permanent strategy for

comprehensive care.

- Despite progress and the recent dissemination of new prevention technologies, the consistent use of condoms as the safest and most effective way to prevent HIV among the sexually-active population is reaffirmed.
- Circumcision alone cannot be considered as a prevention strategy due to the risk of reversing achievements in preventing the transmission of HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections. Its use is based on anthropological, social, cultural, and religious concepts and does NOT preclude distributing and using condoms.
- There is a need for governments to allocate real resources to implement prevention policies developed in coordination with civil society.
- Design specific prevention strategies for the adolescent and young adult populations that include the promotion of HIV testing.
- Incorporate testing with counseling in health promotion and disease prevention strategies within the framework of primary health care.
- Strengthen and expand the coverage of harm reduction programs in the Region to include nonintravenous drug users.
- Strengthen the commitment of the media to awareness and prevention campaigns.
- There is a need to increase interministerial coordination between the health and education sectors to include sex education in the curricula at different educational levels.
- Develop inclusive maternity and child strategies that include the timely promotion of testing with counseling for pregnant woman and care for the mother, and the availability of treatments to reduce the vertical transmission of HIV.

### **Report on Universal Access Notes Persistent Gaps in Treatment**

The report *Towards Universal Access: Scaling Up Priority HIV/AIDS Interventions in the Health Sector*, launched by UNAIDS/WHO/UNICEF in several countries simultaneously—including at the IV Latin American and Caribbean Forum on HIV/AIDS and STI held in Argentina—provided new data on access to antiretroviral therapy that placed the Americas among the regions with greater access to these treatments.

The launch of the report was attended by the Regional UNAIDS Director for Latin America, César Nuñez; the Chief of the PAHO HIV/AIDS Unit, Patricio Rojas; UNICEF Regional Advisor Mark Connolly; and the Director of Argentina's AIDS Program, Daniel Fontana. The report points out that even though approximately 72% of people in the Region that need the treatment are receiving it, enormous gaps persist between countries in terms of access. For example, in Cuba 95% of people who need treatment are receiving it, while in Nicaragua the proportion falls to 35% and in Bolivia, to 24%. Patricio Rojas noted that in more than 20 countries of the Region, only 20% of the people who need antiretrovirals are currently receiving them.

Despite the fact that the price of antiretrovirals has fallen, second-line therapy is still

costly. This, in addition to the fact that as the number of infections increases, the number of people needing treatment also increases, is what has prompted experts to continue to stress prevention as one of the most important responses to the epidemic.

During the forum, experts expressed their concern about the rise of HIV in children and their access to comprehensive care. According to reports on the total number of children receiving antiretrovirals, less than 15% have complete and comprehensive coverage.

To see the complete report on universal access (in English), go to: [http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/universal\\_access\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.who.int/hiv/mediacentre/universal_access_progress_report_en.pdf)

The Executive Summary of the report on universal access (in Spanish) is available at: <http://www.who.int/entity/hiv/mediacentre/UA%20Executive%20Summary%20SPANISH%20version%2013%20April.doc>

### **Report on Homophobia and “VIHdeo America” Support Media Campaigns**

A presentation at the forum on the publication *Campaigns against Homophobia in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico*, which examines the response of various sectors of society to media campaigns against homophobia, and on the DVD anthology “VIHdeo America,” a compilation of 198 television spots produced in 24 countries of the Region, described them as creative tools that facilitate an appreciation and better understanding of the use of mass media as part of the strategy to respond to the challenge of HIV in our Region.

The participants in the session on “VIHdeo America” shared their views about the communications challenges posed by HIV by analyzing some of the videos presented. During the forum, 700 copies of “VIHdeo America” were distributed.

The report on campaigns against homophobia was launched along with the guide entitled *Human Rights, Health, and HIV*, published by UNAIDS, the Horizontal Technical Cooperation Group on HIV/AIDS (*Grupo de Cooperación Técnica en VIH/SIDA – GCTH*), and the International Center for Technical Cooperation on HIV/AIDS (*Centro Internacional de Cooperación Técnica en VIH y SIDA – CICT/SIDA*). The publication contains a guide presenting strategic actions to prevent and combat discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The participants congratulated the organizers on the simultaneous launch of the two complementary publications.

The report on campaigns against homophobia is available at:

<http://www.paho.org/Spanish/AD/FCH/AI/homofobia.pdf>

The “VIHdeo America” Web page is available at: <http://www.paho.org/vihdeoamerica>

### **International Seminar on HIV Infection in Infants and Pediatric AIDS**

Approximately 100 professional experts from the different agencies of the United

Nations system and the countries of the Region participated in this technical seminar. A mother and daughter living with HIV also told their story. The aim was to raise awareness about pediatric AIDS through actions aimed at prevention and the provision of the best treatment and care possible for children with HIV.

The proposals to fill existing gaps in the response to infants with AIDS included: finalizing the Prevention-of-Mother-to-Child-Transmission/Pediatrics guidelines for their adaptation in Latin America and the Caribbean (PMTCT/PEDS LAC); developing the framework of action for early diagnosis in Latin America and the Caribbean; promoting polymerase chain reaction (PCR) through the “dry blood spot” test; having providers initiate testing and counseling services; launching the “dry blood spot” test; drafting protocols; training laboratory staff and health workers; determining shipment mechanisms for samples; and adapting child health cards to include HIV information.

Other recommendations addressed the need to study the current PMTCT situation in the Region; strengthen the leadership of government and academic institutions, NGOs, and professional societies in supporting PMTCT programs; support efforts by the political leadership to achieve a zero level of pediatric AIDS; support the training of human resources; create and strengthen networks of people and institutions involved in PMTCT; and support research on the aspects necessary to fulfill the minimum agenda.

The seminar represents an effort by the Organization to support the countries in their efforts to deal with a problem whose dimensions reflect the existing gaps in health systems in the Region that can be easily be bridged.

### **Most Frequently Used HIV Acronyms**

[http://www.paho.org/English/AD/FCH/AI/Acronym\\_hivAIDS.pdf](http://www.paho.org/English/AD/FCH/AI/Acronym_hivAIDS.pdf)

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