

National institutions and HIV/AIDS: prevention and protection on the ground

Organised by the Permanent Mission of Australia, OHCHR and UNAIDS

Wednesday 13 April 2005 13.00 – 15.00

Palais des Nations, Room XVIII

The parallel event will highlight the human rights dimension of HIV/AIDS and, in particular the role of national human rights institutions (NHRIs). It will provide an opportunity for those NHRIs which have undertaken activities in respect of HIV/AIDS to share their experiences, and for OHCHR and UNAIDS to present their current work. The aim of the event is to encourage all NHRIs to become more involved in HIV/AIDS issues, through a greater understanding of the links between human rights and the spread of the disease, and of the possible roles NHRIs may play.

Speakers, sharing experiences for no more than 10 minutes each, will include representatives of OHCHR and UNAIDS, and of the Malawian and Indian NHRIs. The event will benefit from the presence in Geneva of more than 40 national institutions' delegations attending the meeting of the International Co-ordinating Committee of National Institutions for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. It shall be moderated by Ambassador Mike Smith of the Australian Permanent Mission to the United Nations Office at Geneva.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic and human rights

It is estimated that since the early 1980s, over 22 million lives have been claimed by AIDS. Currently around 40 million people are living with HIV and AIDS. The disease continues to grow, and is fueled by a wide range of human rights violations, including impeded access to information about the disease, a lack of access to adequate health care, sexual violence, and discrimination against groups such as women and girls, sex workers, men who have sex with men, intravenous drug users and prisoners. Human rights violations impede efforts aimed at effective prevention, care, treatment and support. Stigma and discrimination against those living with the disease lie at the base of many violations. Figures published by UNAIDS in 2004 starkly underline the feminization of the disease. Globally, 47% of people with HIV or AIDS are female. The position of young women is invariably worse. In sub-Saharan Africa a staggering 76% of young people (15-24) living with HIV are women.

Without addressing violations of human rights, the battle against HIV and AIDS will not be won. Without a focus on human rights, investments in programmes and policies aimed at halting the spread of the disease will ultimately be wasted. The international community has explicitly recognized the centrality of human rights to strategies to halt the epidemic, most notably in the General Assembly's Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS.

Role of National Human Rights Institutions

NHRIs have a key role to play in promoting a human rights approach to dealing with HIV/AIDS. Credible NHRIs have a status at the national level often not enjoyed by either governmental or non-governmental organizations. This affords them a comparative advantage in ensuring a human rights-based response to HIV/AIDS at the national level, for example in authoritative monitoring of a government's response to the epidemic. This role has been recognized by the Commission on Human Rights when it requested '*States in consultation with relevant national bodies, including national human rights institutions, to develop and support appropriate mechanisms to monitor and enforce HIV/AIDS related human rights*' (Res. 2001/51).

NHRIs can encourage governments to establish effective national HIV and AIDS policies and programmes, lobby for legal reform, monitor governmental actions, raise awareness around HIV/AIDS issues, and deal with specific instances of concern.
