

THE NGO DELEGATION TO THE UNAIDS PROGRAMME COORDINATING BOARD

17 March 2008

Dr. Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS

Cc: Members of the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board

Dear Peter,

Re: Recent developments in the drug policies in Thailand

It is great concern and outrage the NGO Delegates to the UNAIDS Programme Coordinating Board (PCB) feel in response to the recent statements in the press by the newly elected Thai Prime Minister, Samak Sundaravej, that he will use extrajudicial killing to respond to drug use in Thailand, and by the public reinstatement of a war on drugs by the new Thai Interior Minister, Chalerm Yubamrung (see "Thailand PM targets drug dealers" 23 February 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/7260127.stm>).

As you know, the Thaksin Shinawatra-led government's decision in 2003 to respond to drug use in this same manner had disastrous human rights and public health effects. According to Human Rights Watch, the 2003 Thai war on drugs resulted in 2,819 people killed between February and April in 2003. No concrete action has been taken to redress these killings, or to prevent their occurrence in the future.

"Should we do nothing because we are afraid that someone is going to criticise us for silence killings that may occur?" Samak said, when asked about the revival of the government's war on drugs and the possibility of many more killings (The Nation, Bangkok, 23 February 2008).

This chilling statement by Samak Sundaravej must provoke the strongest condemnation from technical experts, UN family agencies, country governments, people living with HIV, drug user networks and their communities.

At its 20th meeting on 20-25 June 2007, the UNAIDS PCB confirmed that all aspects of UNAIDS work should be directed by the following guiding principles:

- Alignment to national stakeholders' priorities;
- Meaningful and measurable involvement of civil society especially people living with HIV and populations most at risk of HIV infection;
- Human rights and gender equality;
- Best available scientific evidence and technical knowledge; and
- Comprehensive responses to AIDS that integrate prevention, treatment, care and support.

In a situation like that in Thailand, UNAIDS has to prove its commitment to the principles it declared.

UNAIDS has a critical role to play in mounting a public response to country actions such as the ones to be re-introduced in Thailand that result in rampant violation of human rights, and that clearly contradict public health best practice regarding responding to the HIV treatment and prevention needs of drug users.

We are concerned by the fact that the upcoming UNAIDS PCB meeting will be held in Chiang Mai, Thailand.

The NGO Delegation to UNAIDS PCB calls on UNAIDS to move this important meeting unless you agree to use the meeting to highlight the extensive damage the war on drugs will do, and to take concrete steps to prevent the Thai government from its decision, including:

- Releasing a public statement and engaging in other public communications and media efforts during and after the PCB meeting criticising the Thai government's decision to re-launch the drug war;
- Organise formal meetings during the PCB meeting regarding the Thai drug war between PCB members, Thai civil society, and relevant government officials including from the Interior Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office; and
- Urgently establish an expert working group comprising government, UN, and non-governmental experts to focus on addressing the urgent need for using evidence-based approaches in the response to drug use in Thai society and elsewhere, and the ways in which the war on drugs undermines human rights and access to essential services for drug users. This working group should be launched at the upcoming PCB meeting.

The NGO delegation calls on Thailand and all countries to collaborate with civil society organisations including people who use drugs to develop a humane approach to their country's drug problems, for example through the promulgation of a national harm reduction policy supporting comprehensive harm reduction services integrated into existing health and social policies and programs and the immediate cessation of compulsory drug "treatment."

Rather than being subjected to indiscriminate suppression, people who use drugs must be supported to be actively and meaningfully involved in leading harm reduction work. Efforts to force tens of thousands into prison or drug treatment are ineffective and immoral. Drug users are part of society, not enemies of society. Efforts to address drug abuse should not dehumanise, degrade, and further damage or destroy the lives of drugs users.

In 2003 UNAIDS and the rest of the world watched silently the violation of human rights of drug users in Thailand that drove drug users underground, away from life extending HIV treatment and prevention services. It is critical that UNAIDS and all other stakeholders not allow these atrocities to take place again.

The NGO Delegation to the UNAIDS Programme Coordination Board:

AFRICA

James Clovis Kayo, Cameroon Network of Associations of PLWHA (RECAP),
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Mercy Machiya, Southern African Network of AIDS Service Organizations
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Gulnara Kurmanova, AntiAIDS Association, Kyrgyz Republic

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