Six Nights in Bangkok

October 1, 2004 By Tim Murphy and Cindra Feuer

Despite a record 17,000 delegates from 160 countries (and a smattering of celebs), the 15th International AIDS Conference was light on treatment news (see "Bangkok Big Top")—and U.S. researchers. Instead, the affair, whose theme was "Access for All," rang with calls for treatment access and denouncements of Dubya.

Sunday 07.11
Before the summit, mobs of activists hit the streets shouting "Free medication to every nation!" * At the opening session, the U.N.'s Kofi Annan says leaders must make "speaking up about AIDS a point of pride." * Hecklers harass Thailand's prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, for his HIV-promoting drug war. * Paisan Suwannawong, the only HIVer scheduled to speak, delivers his remarks last—to a nearly empty auditorium. The faux pas haunts the conference.

Monday 07.12
Ugandan president Yoweri Museveni ruffles feathers, calling abstinence the first line of defense against HIV—and condoms an "improvisation, not a solution." * On an AIDS-funding panel, Richard Gere says, "Money without intelligence is useless" (leave it to a celeb). * AIDS-vaccine expert Seth Berkley, MD, warns that "the world is inching toward a vaccine. We should be making strides." * UNAIDS announces that there are 15 million AIDS orphans worldwide.

Tuesday 07.13
World Health Organization (WHO) AIDS poobah Jim Kim admits that his group is losing the race to treat three million HIVers by 2005, adding, "We have failed miserably" in fighting AIDS. * Annan challenges the U.S. to give $1 billion annually to the Global Fund. Bush global-AIDS flak Randall Tobias later counters that Dubya's proposed $200 million is "more than adequate."

Wednesday 07.14
In the confab's tensest moment, Tobias' speech defending Bush's global-AIDS strategy is delayed by activists shouting "Bush Lies, Millions Die," while moderator and Gates Foundation diva Helene Gayle, MD, tries to keep the peace. After he finally delivers his coldly received speech, Tobias tells media he questions the conference's value. * Five major drugmakers close their booths when drum-banging activists arrive, asking them to sign a pledge backing off global patent protections for HIV meds.

Thursday 07.15
Microbicide crusader Zeda Rosenberg, MD, reminds participants that HIV-blocking vaginal gels are

crucial for women for whom “being poor, young and married are the most significant risk factors for acquiring HIV.” * Top researcher Anthony Fauci, MD, waxes poetic on future gene-based HIV therapies. * The Gates Foundation announces a $50 million donation to the thirsty Global Fund, prompting former South African president Nelson Mandela to urge the Fund to spend more on TB—“a death sentence” for HIVers in developing nations, he says.

Friday 07.16
At the closing ceremony, Mandela, 86, earns a standing ovation, saying, “Allow me to enjoy my retirement by showing that you can rise to the challenge” of reversing the pandemic. * Prominent Indian politician Sonia Gandhi tells the arena her country will prevail over its growing HIV crisis, much as it has over smallpox. * Delegates leave Bangkok wondering whether the next global get-together, in Toronto in 2006, will yield rosier prospects—and avoid another America vs. the World smackdown.

Conference Quotes

“We’ve seen movement on harm reduction at this conference, which is great. And people are talking about MSMs in Africa, challenging some of the denial about sexual behavior.”
—Andy Seale, 36, advocacy adviser, UNAIDS, Switzerland; diagnosed in 2001

“I don’t know what I’m going to tell people at home. I was hoping I’d go back with concrete results. I still don’t see clear strategies for getting people treatment.”
—Beatrice Were, 36, Director of HIV/AIDS at Uganda’s Action AID; diagnosed in 1991

“I was disappointed and hurt that people left before my speech. No one wanted to hear about drug users.”
—Paisan Suwannawong, 39, Thai AIDS Treatment Group activist; diagnosed in 1991

“I’m disappointed at how detrimental the policies of the Bush administration are. I’d like to help Americans—even those of us infected with HIV—realize how well off we are with services and support.”
—Gus Nasmith Jr., 60, AIDS awareness volunteer from the U.S.; diagnosed in 1989

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