U.N. Leaders: More AIDS Money, Fewer Travel Restrictions

June 11, 2008

At a media briefing on June 8 before the United Nations' two-day High Level Meeting on AIDS, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria called for a funding increase of $7 billion to $8 billion to continue fighting the disease in the developing world, Reuters reports (reuters.com, 6/10).

According to Global Fund executive director Michel Kazatchkine, the funding is essential for reaching the group's funding goals for 2008, which will help pay for antiretroviral medication for 1.75 million people. That target group accounts for nearly 60 percent of the 3 million people in low- to middle-income countries receiving HIV treatment. However, as of December 2007, an estimated 33.2 million people around the world are living with the virus. "We are hopeful that these gaps are narrowing…but let's be very careful, because 2008…is a time when some people say you are doing all right with the AIDS epidemic, now we have to focus on something else," said Kazatchkine. "We need a very sustained effort and we still need increased resources."

The funding call comes soon after a recent World Health Organization report asserting that AIDS is no longer a concern for heterosexuals outside of sub-Saharan Africa. Peter Piot, the former executive director of the Joint U.N. Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), subsequently told reporters that these findings may have been overstated.

"The pace of the spread heterosexually is indeed slower than what we had anticipated but it is not a covering up," said Piot, who stepped down from his UNAIDS post on June 10 after 13 years fighting AIDS, according to another Reuters report. "Today, half of all people living with HIV are women. In Africa, it is 61 percent and it is growing in every country, every region and that is mostly because of heterosexual transmission."

Meanwhile at the high-level meeting, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on June 10 called for an end to travel restrictions imposed on people living with HIV in some countries—including the United States—Agence France-Presse reports (afp.google.com, 6/10).

"I call for a change in laws that uphold stigma and discrimination, including restrictions on travel for people living with HIV," said Ban. "It is shocking that there should be discrimination against those at high risk, such as men who have sex with men, or stigma attached to individuals living with HIV."

A letter signed by 345 nongovernmental organizations has been sent to leaders of the 74 countries worldwide that continue to restrict travelers on the basis of their HIV status.

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