UNITING NATIONS AROUND THE FIGHT AGAINST AIDS

June 10, 2008 By Regan Hofmann

The U.N. is now officially one of my favorite places in New York. I am sitting in the delegates' lounge watching the East River flow past the gigantic windows...it would be entirely scenic save for the slight haze created by the smoke of Galouise (someone help with the spelling! I don't smoke! And I last studied French in high school!) cigarettes...the U.N. is considered "international territory" and, as such, it is exempt from the NYC laws preventing people from smoking inside in the city.

In addition to the incredible diplomacy and history-changing events that happen here, it's just an incredibly cool place, infused with a James Bondian flavor, circa 1972. The halls are filled with beautiful art, flags from around the globe and artifacts donated by many nations. Walking through its hallowed halls, I identifed at least three languages I have never heard before. And, in between high level meetings about global warming and AIDS, diplomats, heads of state and delegates come to this lounge...to watch international soccer. Yesterday, in one corner of the lounge, there was a satellite meeting between the U.S. and Swaziland about battling HIV/AIDS...in the other, a rowdy crowd of football fans cheering for their favorite team. Apparently, the "international" language is "football."

I am here serving on the U.S. delegation attending the high-level meeting of the United Nation's General Assemby on HIV/AIDS. I was invited to join the group by Ambassador Mark Dybul. For those who don't know, Ambassador Dybul is the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator, and the man in charge of administering the President's Plan for AIDS Relief, proposed to be a $50 billion relief effort to help people living with AIDS around the world, and to prevent the further spread of the disease. The U.N. meeting is cause to hear representatives from countries around the world speak about their efforts to fight all aspects of the pandemic on their home turf. At the conclusion of the two-day meeting (that was preceded by one day of meetings about the connection between HIV and TB - do you know that TB is the #1 cause of death of HIV-positive people in Africa? And that TB - like HIV - is entirely preventable and treatable?), Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon, will issue a report on the state of global AIDS.

It's a unique opportunity for civil society to interact with global government and it would take so many pages to begin to cover all that I have heard discussed and debated here. But one thing that strikes me above all else is the commonality of the experience of people living with HIV, be they an HIV-positive homeless 8-year-old addicted to heroin, living in the basement of a housing complex in Ukraine; a positive transgendered person from India; a young gay man from Australia living with HIV; or a Latina woman who has become an international AIDS activist after contracting HIV when she was raped on her way home from a community dance in Central America. The manifestations of our common issues may be different (someone in Swaziland, for example, may be be able to access care because they have no shoes and can't walk across the hot earth for miles to reach a clinic while a gay person in Russia may be afaid to go to an AIDS clinic for fear of being attacked in a hate crime) but the basic things we struggle to

overcome are universal. And we can learn so much by listening to how people in different places create solutions to the same problems.

I have a lot to write, but right now, I'm headed to Iris House in Harlem (where, I reminded any who would listen, the HIV infection rate rivals that of parts of South Africa) to give a speech with Dr. Robert Fullilove. So, I'll post more today - and pictures too!

In the meantime, click here to read Secretary Ban Ki-moon's address to the General Assembly.
http://www.un.org/apps/news/infocus/sgspeeches/statements_full.asp?statID=260

Later today, I should also be able to link to Ambassador Mark Dybul's address.

To read more breaking news from the UNGASS meeting, go to POZ's home page and read yesterday's and today's news. One newsflash...the Secretary-General thinks the travel restrictions for people with HIV should be lifted! I certainly agree. Don't you?

Stay tuned for more UNGASS news and the latest word from Harlem!

Back in a bit.

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