

PLENARY SESSION, FRIDAY 16 JULY
08:30 – 10:00, Session Hall A (Arena)
DAILY THEME: Overcoming Challenges Through Empowerment and Action
SPEAKER BIOS:

Mechai Viravaidya

Population and Community Development Association, Thailand

Mechai Viravaidya served as a Minister of the Prime Minister's Office in Thailand from 1991-1992 and currently serves as a Senator in the Thai Parliament. He is the founder and chairman of the Population and Community Development Association (PDA), one of Thailand's largest private, non-profit development organisations. In the late 1980s, Senator Mechai, then an economist active in family planning issues, began a campaign to encourage the use of condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS. He led an initiative to distribute condoms to prostitutes in red-light districts, often handing them out himself. As a result of his efforts, Thais began calling him "Mr. Condom" and began calling condoms "mechais." His efforts have proven successful. During 1991-1992, about 250,000 people were infected annually, but now the number has fallen to 16,000 (*The Nation*, June 2004).

During the Conference, Senator Mechai has arranged for Thai authorities to distribute more than 350,000 condoms to Conference delegates and the general Bangkok population. They will be distributed to motorists who use the expressways during the Conference, as well as to travellers at a main traffic artery, Hualamphong train station. Police officers will also distribute condoms to drivers stuck in traffic.

Senator Mechai was appointed Ambassador for UNAIDS in 1999 and has received numerous awards, including the United Nations Population Award in 1997 and the United Nations Gold Peace Medal in 1981.

Irene Kahn

Amnesty International, United Kingdom

Irene Zubaida Khan became the Secretary General of Amnesty International in 2001. She is the first woman, the first Asian and the first Muslim to lead the organisation. Ms. Kahn has worked to highlight the human rights aspect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. On World AIDS Day in 2002, Amnesty International released a statement stating that, "Social exclusion, economic deprivation and discrimination are integrally linked to HIV/AIDS." The statement also said, "Those who are on the social margins of society, who are denied access to their most basic human rights – to freedom from discrimination, to education, to physical integrity, to health care and to economic security – are the most vulnerable to HIV infection."

According to Ms. Kahn and Amnesty International, the right to health, the right to personal security and freedom from discrimination based on sex or sexual orientation and the right to work are among those rights that must be protected in order to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS.

A long-time human rights supporter and activist, Ms. Kahn helped found the development organisation, Concern Universal, in 1977. She previously worked at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). She has received several academic awards including a Ford Foundation Fellowship.

Luiz Paulo Teixeira Ferreira

Urban Development and Housing Municipal Secretariat, Brazil

Dr. Luiz Paulo Teixeira Ferreira has been leading the Urban Development and Housing Municipal Secretariat of the City of Sao Paulo, Brazil since 2001. In his previous role as the state deputy for the Worker's Party in Sao Paulo, Dr. Ferreira promoted harm reduction initiatives for the state's injecting drug user population. Specifically, he helped enact a state law to authorize the Health Secretariat to distribute clean syringes and needles to injecting drug users. He also helped enact legislation to authorize the use of public funds in the state of Sao Paulo to implement harm reduction programs.

The sharing of needles among injecting drug users has been a primary means of HIV transmission in Brazil since the early 1990's, and the state of Sao Paulo has had one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS prevalence.

Reverend Canon Gideon Byamugisha

World Vision, Uganda

Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha became the first practising African priest to openly disclose his HIV-positive status in 1992. He made the decision to share his story just days after losing his wife to AIDS. In an effort to overcome the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, he has said, "In the African setting you cannot survive without other people's support. It becomes crucial that you share. Not that you have to shout it over the radio, but the people who matter to you - your spouse, your children, your employers - should know" (*the UN Works*, June 2004).

He has dedicated his life to combating HIV/AIDS-related stigma and discrimination, and mobilising community action against the epidemic. Rev. Canon Gideon Byamugisha currently serves as World Vision's church and faith-based organisations specialist, helping to research and develop prototype HIV/AIDS prevention, care and advocacy programs. He has written five books on HIV/AIDS.