

Kaisernetwork.org Daily Updates from the XV International AIDS Conference

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Seventeen thousand delegates from 160 countries attended the opening ceremonies of the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand. The theme this year is “Access for All.” Conference co-chair Dr. Joep Lange told the delegates it’s about more than access to AIDS medications. “Access to unbiased information and education about HIV/AIDS; access to effective prevention tools; access to comprehensive medical care; access to resources; access to those things that will minimize the impact HIV/AIDS has on human lives. It also stands for access to essential HIV-related science,” he said.

The Bangkok conference marks the first time a secretary general of the United Nations has attended. Kofi Annan spoke about the importance of leadership at every level. “We need leaders everywhere to demonstrate that speaking up about AIDS is a point of pride, not a source of shame,” he said. “There must be no more sticking heads in the sand, no more embarrassment, and no more hiding behind a veil of apathy.”

Before the conference even began protesters marched to the conference center demanding access to AIDS medications for all six million people who need them as well as access to condoms and clean needles. They also called for world leaders to address the inequities in treatment availability. Paisan Suwannawong is with the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group, which helped organize the march. “We need wealthy countries to donate money immediately so we can treat the people and we can prevent transmission of infection,” he said.

The protestors were especially eager to garner support for fully funding the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Richard Feachem, head of the Global Fund, addressed the crowd. “We’ve made a lot of progress in a short period of time,” he said. “In some countries there is hope and treatment is scaling up but in some countries progress is much slower and we need your help to accelerate. We need to do more and we need to do it faster.”

Forty million adults and children are infected with HIV. While Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence rate, AIDS in Asia stands at the brink of disaster with over 5 million people in India alone HIV-positive. And while Thailand—the host country of the conference—has been cited as a model for its successful efforts to curb the rate of infection, a new United Nations Development Programme report warns that the country must renew its fight or face an explosion in new cases—a warning many other countries will hear this week in Bangkok.

A unity candle, lit by Thailand’s Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Kofi Annan, honored the more than 20 million people who have died of AIDS. Conference delegates joined in to memorialize them as well as hope for a brighter future with prevention and treatment for all.