

INTERNATIONAL EXPERTS MEET IN MEXICO CITY TO PLAN AIDS 2008 PROGRAMME, WITH FOCUS ON LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN HIV RESEARCH, PREVENTION AND CARE

Mexico City [20 March 2007] As planning for the XVII International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2008) gets underway this week in Mexico City, organizers are committed to creating a far-reaching programme featuring the latest developments in HIV research, prevention and treatment, with continued attention given to the dangers of HIV-related stigma, discrimination and misinformation.

"With efforts to expand access to prevention and treatment underway, and new scientific developments in treatment and biomedical prevention on the horizon, we are gaining momentum," said International AIDS Society (IAS) President and AIDS 2008 Co-Chair Dr. Pedro Cahn, who is also President of Fundación Huésped in Buenos Aires, Argentina. "However, there is still much to do, and we must remain vigilant on all fronts, including efforts to eliminate HIV-related stigma and discrimination."

"As the first International AIDS Conference to be held in Latin America, AIDS 2008 is an opportunity for Mexico and Latin America to showcase our accomplishments and learn from others," said AIDS 2008 Co-Chair Dr. Luis Soto-Ramirez, Head of the Molecular Virology Unit at the Instituto Nacional de Ciencias Médicas y Nutrición and Coordinator of the Clinical Care Committee of CONASIDA. "We look forward to hosting AIDS 2008 and to working with our colleagues internationally to help address one of the most critical issues of our time."

The International AIDS Conference is the world's largest and most important HIV/AIDS forum. With over 20,000 participants -- including 2,500 journalists -- the conference is expected to increase awareness of the disease and its impact throughout the region. The conference will be held in Mexico City from 3-8 August 2008.

AIDS 2008 is convened by the International AIDS Society (IAS), the world's leading independent association of HIV professionals. Representatives from the IAS, local and international partners comprise the AIDS 2008 Conference Coordinating Committee, which is meeting from 19-20 March 2007 in Mexico City.

At a press conference today, organizers spoke forcefully of the need to reject HIV-related stigma and discrimination in all its forms.

"If we continue building a culture of hatred and stigmatizing those who are living with the virus, we will have an uncontrollable epidemic," said Carlos García de León, a representative of Mexican civil society on the AIDS 2008 Conference Coordinating Committee, who is also the Special Projects Coordinator for AVE de Mexico and represents the Latin American and Caribbean region on the ICASO (International Council of AIDS Service Organizations) Board of Directors.

"The isolating effects and other repercussions of stigma and discrimination have a direct impact on the self-esteem and quality of life for women living with HIV/AIDS," said Angelica M. Valenzuela, AIDS 2008 Conference Coordinating Committee member, Vice-President of Programs for the Children Affected by AIDS Foundation (CAAF) and Executive and Steering Committee Member for the Coalition on Children Affected by AIDS (CCABA).

Conference organizers also addressed recent misinformation spread in Mexico and elsewhere by so-called AIDS denialists -- individuals who, despite clear scientific evidence to the contrary, insist that HIV either does not exist or is a harmless virus.

"AIDS denialists have caused untold damage and death, particularly in the developing world, through their concerted disinformation campaign," said Dr. Cahn. "As an organization that supports an evidence-based approach to HIV/AIDS, the IAS rejects such claims and urges others to do the same at every opportunity."

"The claims by so-called AIDS denialists have been rejected elsewhere, most notably in South Africa, and must be rejected here in Mexico, as well," said Dr. Soto-Ramirez. "We cannot allow such misinformation to undermine Mexico's efforts to expand access to antiretroviral therapy, and to prevent HIV infection through proven interventions, such as condom use and access to sterile syringes," he added.

At the press conference organizers also praised the Mexican Supreme Court's recent ruling protecting the right of Mexican soldiers living with HIV to serve in the military and thanked the Mexican government for its commitment to uphold the ruling and protect the rights of these soldiers.

For more information about AIDS 2008, including information on media and delegate registration, visit <http://www.aids2008.org>.

ABOUT THE AIDS 2008 ORGANIZERS:

AIDS 2008 is convened by the International AIDS Society (IAS), the world's leading independent association of HIV professionals. Local partners include the federal government of Mexico, the Government of Mexico City and local scientific and community leadership.

International institutional partners for AIDS 2008 include:

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)
International Council of AIDS Service Organizations (ICASO)
Global Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS
(GNP+)/International Community of Women Living with HIV/AIDS (ICW)
World YWCA
Asian Harm Reduction Network (AHRN)