

PACIFIC FACES EXPANDING HIV THREAT

Auckland, 19 October 2005 – The threat of HIV and AIDS in New Zealand and neighbouring Pacific regions is bigger than ever before say Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the New Zealand AIDS Foundation on the eve of New Zealand's first large-scale international conference on HIV and AIDS.

The Te whanau of te Moana-Nui-A-Kiwa, Me te Mate Parekore – Family of the Pacific and HIV/AIDS Pan Pacific Regional HIV/AIDS Conference will take place in Auckland from October 25 to 28.

More than 450 delegates will attend the conference, including international scientists, researchers, community activists, traditional and religious leaders, youth groups and health promoters, along with Pacific region leaders, and people living with HIV from throughout the region. The conference will feature a strong indigenous voice and, for many for the first time, create a safe place for Pacific people living with HIV/AIDS to speak out about the epidemic, how it is affecting them, their families and their countries.

“This is the first time an international HIV and AIDS conference has concentrated on the Pacific region,” said NZAF Executive Director Rachael Le Mesurier, “and it could not have come at a better time. It will be a clarion call to political, community, traditional and church leaders throughout the Pacific to unite in the fight against this most deadly of epidemics which is threatening us all.”

Ms Le Mesurier said HIV has been described as a “storm gathering off shore” in the South Pacific that is about to erupt on Pacific communities in a devastating way, as it already has in Papua New Guinea, unless prevention and support programmes are strengthened and receive greater leadership at all levels.

Her call has been supported by Prasada Rao, Regional Director for UNAIDS Asia Pacific. “The global HIV epidemic has no boundaries. Pacific Island countries face an urgent challenge to prevent new infections and reinforce HIV and AIDS education programmes to protect this unique region from the threat of this storm”, he said “UNAIDS will continue to engage government and civil society partners to work towards this goal”.

In New Zealand, there are more people living with HIV than ever before and suggestions that, if current trends continue, 2005 could be a record year for new infections.

The key themes at this conference will be: challenging people out of complacency and silence around HIV; challenging homophobia and criminalization of homosexuality and sex workers that fosters the spread of HIV by marginalizing some communities; encouraging churches to take leadership roles in combating HIV that are non-judgmental and show a commitment to honesty and integrity when working with the realities of sexual practices in our societies; and to emphasize that New Zealand is part of the Pacific.

“We are a family,” Ms Le Mesurier said, “and need to work together as a family as HIV affects us all – socially, economically and politically.”

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