

### **PACIFIC ISLANDS FACE RAPIDLY EXPANDING HIV EPIDEMIC, SAYS UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

#### **HIV prevention programmes targeting young people must be scaled up urgently**

**Nadi, Fiji, 22 March 2004** – The Pacific Island countries have a unique opportunity to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS before it is too late. “Although HIV prevalence levels remain low, we must not underestimate the size of the challenges confronting the Pacific Islands region,” said Dr Peter Piot, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, in a video statement for the opening of the UNAIDS workshop, “Accelerating Action Against HIV/AIDS in the Pacific”, being held in Fiji from 22-26 March 2004. “The stage is set for an expanding and widespread HIV epidemic in the region due to a dramatic increase in sexually transmitted infections and risky sexual behaviour among young people aged 15 to 25,” he said.

Papua New Guinea has the highest reported rate of HIV infection in the Pacific, with an estimated HIV prevalence of over 1% among pregnant women attending antenatal clinics in 3 urban sites around mining areas in Port Moresby.

In Samoa and Vanuatu, over 20% of women attending antenatal clinics have had at least one sexually transmitted infection. High levels of teenage pregnancies have also been reported in the Cook Islands, Kiribati, Micronesia and Palau. “Young people must be at the core of the AIDS response,” said Dr Piot. “HIV prevention programmes targeting young people, particularly girls, who are most vulnerable to HIV, must be scaled up urgently if we want a realistic chance at turning back the epidemic in the Pacific.”

In light of the growing epidemic, international funding to fight AIDS in the Pacific has increased recently. The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria has allocated funds to boost HIV prevention services in the region, focusing on the reduction of sexually transmitted infections as vehicles of HIV transmission. The Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) has committed 12.5 million Australian dollars to help develop and implement a regional AIDS strategy to strengthen the capacity of national governments and NGOs to effectively fight AIDS.

The workshop, co-hosted by the Great Council of Chiefs of Fiji, brings together over 100 government, NGO and private sector representatives from the Pacific Island countries as well as donors and UN officials.

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