

## **HIV/AIDS in Prison and the Human Rights of Infected Persons Received Lots of Attention at the 2010 AIDS Conference in Vienna**

Over 20,000 participants attended the 285 sessions of XVIII International AIDS Conference. The ICCPPC representatives assisted in the establishment in the Vienna NGO Committee booth and participated in as many of the sessions as possible on HIV prevention best practices in prisons, the arguments for decriminalization of HIV transmission, and the role of religious communities in supporting infected persons and fighting against discrimination and stigmatization.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime co-sponsored a number of satellite sessions and poster discussions on opioid substitution, HIV prevention among injecting drug users, condoms, voluntary testing, and counseling for people with AIDS in prisons, and held press conferences on compulsory centres for drug users. The UNODC global co-ordinator for HIV/AIDS participated with UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health, Human Rights Watch, and the Open Society Institute in condemning the detention of methamphetamine users in Cambodia, China, Laos and Thailand. UNODC has issued a Policy Brief which says "prisoners have the right to receive health care, including preventive measures, equivalent to that available in the community" (condoms, needle exchange, methadone), "treatment, care, and support" (upholding standards of confidentiality and informed consent) as well as a Technical Paper on Testing; Evidence for Action Technical Papers on Effectiveness of Interventions to Address HIV in Prisons, and A Framework for Prevention, Care, Treatment, and Support in Prison Settings ([www.unodc.org](http://www.unodc.org)). A new report recommends extensive legislative reforms in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. It criticizes the punitive drug control laws, the non-voluntary medical interventions, mandatory HIV testing, and the limited participation of civil society in the development, implementation and evaluation of the effectiveness of national strategies on HIV and drugs. UNODC circulated a discussion paper from a 2009 scientific workshop "Treating Drug Dependence through health care, not punishment".

Spain was hailed by many participants for its comprehensive approach to HIV and MCV in prisons. The scaling up of needle and syringe programmes and methadone maintenance treatment in prisons in Moldova was seen as a success. The Russian policy on needle exchange was seen as backward. The huge detention labor camps for drug users in China was roundly condemned. The criminalization of homosexuality (men having sex with men) and illegality of condoms in prisons was viewed as counterproductive in terms of curbing HIV/AIDS. Human Rights Watch, Prisons Care and Counseling Association, and the AIDS & Rights Alliance for Southern Africa called the Zambian Prisons "inhuman and degrading" due to the overcrowding, beatings, widespread TB and HIV, malnutrition of detainees - one third have never had a trial. Individual

assessments of AIDS and programmes in Georgia, Lebanon, Tamil Nadu, Cote D'Ivoire, Indonesia, Haiti, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Cameroon, and in the US were presented in the poster discussions. Model programs in the US were described in the US( methadone maintenance at Rikers Island in New York, Puerto Rico and in Rhode Island, condom distribution in California); Initially skeptical prison officials admitted in the case of medication assisted therapy, a marked decrease in drug seeking behaviour and greater adherence to medication regimens (less post release relapses). Discussion groups in prison about risky behaviour were found useful; one participant also singled out the possibilities for information at arrest, court, probation, parole, or in alternative sentences. Pastoral counseling was explicitly mentioned.

Faith-Based Organizations and the HIV/AIDS Pandemic was discussed in many fora. Conservative Christians, the American Evangelicals, the official Catholic Church, and Islam were criticized for their blinded view of reality and the condemnation of homosexuality. Catholic Relief Services which has provided crucial support for over two decades for HIV and AIDS programs was present at the Conference with a stall, as was an activist organization, "Catholics for Choice". A Protestant Bishop made a passionate appeal in a plenary session, that compassion should trump legalism everytime, (sanctity of life is greater than sin of condom use) and that Christ's ministry is to people at the margins of society (including transgender persons and sex workers). Persons from the International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV/ HiVS identified themselves openly in sessions. An organization based in Netherlands (Coraid) has been awarding prizes to religious organizations since 2008- Southern African Catholic Bishop's Conference, Caritas-Congo, Sida Service Catholic - Senegal, Salvation Army-South Africa, among others for their support of AIDS sufferers. On 20 July, at the opening of the Conference a prayer service "We call for Justice" took place in the Catholic Church, Votivkirche, with Hindus, Muslims, Protestants, Buddhists, and Evangelicals. The conference was closed with a video message from Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

Many contacts and friendships were made during the conference. This conference was notable for its openness, emphasis on human rights, and focus on people incarcerated. Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur, in the final plenary session, called for a comprehensive reform of the criminal justice and prison systems to ensure an adequate response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. He said voluntary HIV testing, counselling, provision of condoms, needles, syringes and opoid substitution therapy in prisons would provide effective ways to contain the spread of HIV. The Vienna Declaration calls on governments to decriminalize drug users, scale up treatment options, and abolish compulsory drug treatment centres. The next AIDS conference will take place in two years time in Washington. Many of the plenary interventions are available as a webcast on the conference site @aids2010