



UN-backed report urges Pacific nations to scale up response to HIV/AIDS



2 December 2009 – A new United Nations-backed report calls on countries in the Pacific Ocean region to scale up their response to HIV and AIDS, which is being fuelled in the region by violence against women, stigma and unprotected sex.

According to "Turning the tide: an OPEN strategy for a response to AIDS in the Pacific," the first report published by the Commission on AIDS in the Pacific, an estimated 59,000 people were living with HIV in the region in 2008, of which 3,800 were new infections.

Excluding Australia and New Zealand, Papua New Guinea accounted for more than 99 per cent of reported HIV cases in the region in 2007. Outside of Papua New Guinea, the islands of New Caledonia, Fiji, French Polynesia and Guam account for the vast majority of HIV infections.

Among the report's recommendations is strengthening health systems, overcoming stigma and discrimination, creating a safe environment for people living with HIV, strengthening country surveillance and developing a strong evidence base, and better aligning regional and international support with national priorities.

"We now have a much more complete picture and clear recommendations for action," Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon **said** at the launch of the **report**, which weaves together the story of HIV in 22 geographically and culturally diverse countries in the region.

He pointed out that in countries with large populations, even several million HIV infections can seem like "drops in a bucket." But where populations are small, as in the island nations of the Pacific, infections in the hundreds or thousands can translate into high prevalence

rates – with devastating impacts on individuals, families, communities, economies and even security.

“By implementing these recommendations, Pacific countries can prevent increases in infections and deaths, avoid economic losses and improve the lives of people at risk,” said Mr. Ban.

The Secretary-General highlighted five priority areas of action. First, countries must provide and enforce legislative protection for people living with HIV and their families.

“There can be no effective response to AIDS as long as some parts of the population are marginalized and denied basic health and human rights. This includes people living with HIV, sex workers, men who have sex with men, and injecting drug users,” he stated.

Second, governments and donors must engage with civil society in decision-making. Third, Pacific countries must move from planning to implementation. Mr. Ban said action is especially important in Papua New Guinea – “the overwhelming locus of the Pacific epidemic.”

Fourth, countries must ensure that their HIV policies and programmes empower women, said the Secretary-General, noting that gender inequalities and gender-based violence are major drivers of the epidemic in the Pacific.

This point was also stressed at a news conference held after the launch, at which Nafis Sadik, UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, stated that the number of women becoming infected is increasing “dramatically” in the Pacific.

In some countries, such as Papua New Guinea, 60 per cent of those infected are women, she noted. “So the importance of addressing gender inequalities and empowering women is particularly important.”

The fifth priority highlighted by Mr. Ban is to give greater funding to prevention activities aimed at high-risk behaviours. Programmes must address behaviours and not population groups, to avoid stigma and discrimination, he noted.

The report indicated that funding for HIV activities in the region increased more than five-fold between 2001 and 2009, and more than \$77 million was available for HIV activities in 2008. However, the cost of implementing HIV programmes in the region is high due to the cultural and linguistic diversity, limited and expensive transport networks and a poor communications infrastructure.

Mr. Ban added that next September’s summit at UN Headquarters on the globally agreed anti-poverty targets known as the Millennium Development Goals (**MDGs**) will provide an opportunity to highlight the need to integrate AIDS within the broader development agenda.

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