

Create massive awareness to combat HIV/AIDS

SA parliamentary seminar recommends

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Second Sub-regional South Asian Parliamentary Seminar on HIV/AIDS ended in the city yesterday with a call to create massive public awareness to combat the deadly disease.

The speakers at the concluding session of the two-day seminar said HIV/AIDS is not only a clinical issue but also a political one to be addressed on an urgent basis.

The seminar was organised by Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) at a city hotel with the support of UN and other international organisations.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Advocate Abdul Hamid attended the concluding session as chief guest.

Chaired by Barrister Ziaur Rahman Khan MP, the session was moderated by Zahiruddin Swapan MP and attended by Shazia Z Rafi,

secretary general of PGA.

Abdul Hamid said the country's parliamentarians are working on HIV/AIDS, human trafficking and other serious issues affecting the people in general.

He also read out a message sent to the seminar by the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Sheikh Hasina.

In her message, Hasina said her government in 1996 recognised HIV/AIDS as a national problem and took immediate measures to combat the disease.

She said apart from national actions, joint collaboration among the neighbouring countries is imperative to tackle the disease because of its cross-boundary nature.

Jatiya Party Chairman H M Ershad also sent a message to the seminar.

Regional Director for South Asian Region of Action Aid John

Samuel said there has to be a multi-sectoral approach to combat HIV/AIDS as it is not only a clinical issue but also a human, political, economic and cultural issue.

Opposition Chief Whip Abdus Shaheed MP, G M Quader MP and Habiba Akhter, executive director of Ashar Alo Society, an NGO working with HIV positives, and other experts from home and abroad were present at the concluding session.

Earlier on January 26, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia inaugurated the seminar where Dr Nafis Sadik, special envoy of the UN secretary general for HIV/AIDS in Asia and Pacific, was the keynote speaker.

Parliamentarians from different countries including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Thailand and Canada along with international experts and members of different UN organisations took part in the seminar.

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Khaleda calls for collective efforts to fight AIDS

UNB, DHAKA

Describing HIV/AIDS as a global development crisis, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia yesterday urged all to come up with collective and coordinated efforts at local, national, regional and international levels to get over the health menace.

Begum Khaleda Zia, also current chairperson of SAARC, made the call while inaugurating the Second Sub-regional Parliamentary Seminar on HIV/AIDS in South Asia by Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA) at Pan Pacific Sonargaon.

"We must also learn from our mistakes and successes, and critically review our past experiences in order to move forward," she told the seminar attended by members of PGA from both home and abroad, diplomats and representative of international organisations.

Some important steps at regional level have been taken to fight HIV/AIDS, she said adding that the South Asian leaders at the recently concluded 13th SAARC Summit in Dhaka welcomed the preparation of a collective SAARC strategy to prevent the spread of the disease in the region.

The South Asian leaders also ratified the SAARC convention on trafficking of women and children which, while protecting women and children, will help prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. The leaders also approved the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs), one of which is to contain HIV/AIDS, she added.

Quoting UN-AIDS that some 8.2 million people were living with HIV/AIDS at the end of 2004, she said a number of countries in Asia have shown either nation-wide epidemic or serious and localised epidemic.

The Prime Minister said it is feared that AIDS epicenter is gradually shifting from Africa to Asia and experiences also indicate that HIV/AIDS has no racial, class or religious bias. "No country can claim immunity from HIV epidemic.

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Parliamentarians moot concludes

Checks urged on NGOs funding to control Aids

KARACHI, Jan 31: Parliamentarians, including members of national assembly, Senate and four provincial assemblies, have suggested absolute transparency and accountability with regard to funding allocated to NGOs working in social and health sectors, particularly for HIV/Aids control, by the government as well as the international donor agencies.

They were making recommendations at the second day of the Provincial Parliamentary Seminar on HIV/Aids Policy, which concluded here on Tuesday.

Summing up the proceedings of the two-day moot, MNA Kashmala Tariq said: "We being custodians and elected representatives of the people of Pakistan must know where and how the money being provided for public welfare is spent".

Parliamentarians had earlier taken strong exception to the remarks made by an NGO representative regarding indifference of politicians towards pertinent issues of the masses.

She recommended close coordination between federal and provincial assembly members and the Aids Control Programme Managers, working in each of the four provinces, so as to help ensuring that the public representatives know actual status of work being taking place in context of HIVS/Aids prevention and support to the patients.

This coordination would also help strengthen the programme in each of the provinces once they were kept well-informed about the growing or changing needs with the passage of time.

On behalf of parliamentarians, she assured that they would help providing all support to the programme with specific reference to availability of medication, which was expensive and beyond means of most of the patients, mainly pertaining to poor segments of the society.

"Gap between NGOs, parliamentarians and bureaucracy needs to be bridged," Kashmala Tariq suggested.

Referring to availability of funds provided to all four provinces by the World Bank, she suggested that the provinces should ensure timely submission

of their respective projects and avoid any unnecessary delay.

MPAs Zubaida Khatoun (from NWFP Assembly), Dr Muzzafar Ali (Punjab Assembly), Syed Talib Imam (Sindh Assembly) and Balochistan Health Minister Hafiz Abdullah in their respective recommendations assured all efforts to initiate legislation and also its implementation to provide blood screening facilities and provision for safe blood as well as disposable syringes and other required facilities, in all parts of the country, to prevent further spread of the HIV.

They underscored the need for developing information material about the disease, its causes, prevention and control, in all regional languages.

They were also unanimous in their opinion to involve, motivate and educate religious preachers to realize intensity and actual facts without any bias about the disease and educate people to protect themselves and their dear ones against it.

They suggested building close linkages between members of the national assembly, provincial assemblies and local governments, to help protect people from their respective constituencies against the scourge, with maximum strength and necessary coordination, despite all political differences.

Balochistan Health Minister Hafiz Abdullah said that he would ensure convening a full session of the provincial assembly about the disease involving all members to ascertain their role in protecting their people against the disease.

Dr Aldo Landi mentioned that Pakistan had been provided with a golden opportunity to contain further spread of the disease and said that people here did have strong family values, especially in the rural areas, but as the situation was changing pragmatic attitude was required to be adopted.

Shazia Rasheed of Parliamentarians Global Action expressed her gratitude to the provincial and national assemblies, Senate, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, Swiss and Norwegian governments for their coordination and making the event a success.—APP

Sub-regional parliamentary seminar on Aids begins today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Second Sub-Regional South Asian Parliamentary Seminar on HIV/Aids begins in the city today.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia will inaugurate the two-day seminar at Sonargaon Hotel, organised by the Parliamentarians for Global Action (PGA), an international organisation.

Renowned health expert and Special Envoy of the UN Secretary General for HIV/Aids in Asia and the Pacific Nafis Sadik will read out the keynote paper.

About 50 parliamentarians from 13 countries will take part in the seminar to discuss how can the HIV epidemic in South Asia be characterised and how can the parliamentarians and community leaders fight stigma of HIV and discrimination.

Four working sessions on HIV in South Asia, political commitment, care and treatment and resource mobilisation will be held during the seminar, said Zahir Uddin Swapan MP at a press briefing at the National Press Club yesterday.

Ziaur Rahman Khan MP, co-chairman of the organising committee, said HIV/Aids is one of the highly prioritised problems across the world and it needs to be addressed at policy level.

The seminar will also reassess the achievement of the first Sub-Regional South Asian Parliamentary seminar on HIV/AIDS held in Islamabad last year, he added.

Chief Whip of the Opposition Abdus Shahid MP, Ruhul Kuddus MP and Sazia Rafi, secretary general of PGA, were also present.

Legislators discuss steps to contain Aids

KARACHI, Jan 30: The two-day parliamentarians' seminar on HIV/Aids policy began here on Monday with legislators from within the country and abroad emphasizing the need for an effective strategy to contain the spread of the deadly disease in Pakistan before the situation gets out of control.

The participating parliamentarians and representatives of UN bodies also underlined need for pragmatic legislation and policies alongside mass awareness campaign for the purpose and for removal of misperceptions about Aids.

MPAs from the Senate, National Assembly and four provincial assemblies, as well as parliamentarians from Canada, Malaysia, Nepal, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and Thailand, are attending the seminar, organised by the Parliamentarians for Global Action, Sindh Assembly and Aga Khan University in collaboration with UNAIDS.

In her keynote address read at the moot, Dr Nafis Sadik, Special Envoy of the UN Secretary-General to Pakistan on HIV/Aids, said that Pakistan, though an encouraging national policy to combat the disease, has yet to witness a change in underlying conditions.

Dr Sadik, who could not attend the seminar due to her illness, expressed her concern over the surge in the cases of HIV/Aids, and observed that in the worst-affected countries, economies and the society itself were collapsing under the burden.

With regard to Pakistan, it was observed that effective treatment still reached only a small fraction of those infected and only a few cases were reported.

In addition, Sindh, like many parts of the Pakistan, shows high rates of poverty, illiteracy and gender inequality, low levels of health care and information, and

high proportions of young people whose behaviour could go well outside traditional norms.

"In these conditions, a general HIV/Aids outbreak here is not only possible, but highly expected," she warned, reiterating that 'low and slow' epidemic is just wishful thinking.

The envoy also referred to other relevant facts, saying that all conditions were in place for a general HIV/Aids outbreak here, in the immediate future.

"The experience in Pakistan and elsewhere shows that there is a way to fight HIV/Aids successfully by strong leadership, early actions, focus on preventing infection, and reaching out to people who need protection most," she said referring to womenfolk.

Dr Nafis Sadik also suggested the need for tackling the looming epidemic through a real multi-sectoral approach that has been emphasized by the UN Millennium Declaration, the G-8 Commitment and by the recent endorsement by the G-8 of scaling up through universal access by the year 2010.

She said that it was encouraging to know that the cost of HIV/Aids treatment was coming down, and that drug regimens were rapidly improving.

The UNAIDS Coordinator in Bangkok M. Ali Bhuiyan said Pakistan needed immediate measures to check the spread of HIV/Aids. Otherwise, he added, the number of people living with the virus might rise to 716,000 by the year 2015 against the present estimate of 3,000.

He said that the Aids-control programme must become part of the political agenda and national development plan. "If intervention is not made now Pakistan may be forced to spend \$35 million annually on account of controlling Aids after 10 years."

Nimal Siripala, Sri Lanka Minister for Healthcare and Nutrition, said the people of the region, in general, should adopt a cautious but effective approach towards the problem.

"How to introduce public

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SYED Muzaffar Hussain Shah speaks at the seminar on Aids on Monday.—Dawn

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awareness about the aspect in accordance with our respective cultures and backgrounds is a major challenge," he said, adding that his country had attempted to address this problem by linking it with the family planning programme.

He suggested that parliamentarians of South Asia must immediately focus on formulating a safe blood transfusion policy.

He pointed out that 1.5 million people were contracting the disease every year and 7.4 million people, including a considerable number of children, were already living with the scourge.

He proposed availability of ARV drugs free of cost to those suffering from the diseases.

Parliamentarians are also needed to realize that poverty, illiteracy and ignorance are aggravating the situation in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Maldives where Aids prevalence is as low yet risks are high.

Dr Aldo Landi, UNAIDS Country Representative, discussing the global situation of HIV/Aids, said that till December 2005, more than 40 million such cases had been registered.

Efforts like this exercise by parliamentarians can help develop linkages and formulate joint strategies with maximum level

of commitment and strength.

Dr France Donnay, UNFPA Representative, mentioning that 75 per cent of HIV transmission appeared to be due to physical promiscuity, said that measures to improve reproductive health could have direct and positive bearing on efforts to protect women and children from contracting the disease.

She urged the parliamentarians to strengthen the policies and programmes concerning the family planning and maternal care.

Secretary Health Sindh Dr Naushad Sheikh said that only 1,123 HIV cases had been reported in Sindh till date, but for every diagnosed case, there remained 30 undiagnosed HIV carriers. It is imperative to discard the stigmatization attached with HIV.

MPA Fareeha Razzak Haroon said that out of the total population living below the poverty line, nearly 35 per cent was inhabited in South Asia, which increased the risk of the spread of HIV in the region.

The situation in Pakistan is not as critical as in the neighbouring countries, but it is gradually worsening, according to her. She observed that women sex workers was the second most vulnerable segment on HIV risk scale following the addicts using syringes.

Ms Shazia Marri urged parliamentarians

to rise above their political affiliation in dealing with the problem.

Citing numerous bills not yet enacted into law by the Sindh Assembly due to disagreement among opposition and treasury benches, she said politics must not hinder the initiatives supposed to be taken in the greater interest of society.

She said her party, PPP, would submit a draft bill with the Sindh Assembly to provide legislative cover to the efforts towards controlling the HIV/Aids.

President of the Lawyers for Human Rights and Legal Aid Mr Zia Awan said that the people living with the disease, as well as their families, needed legal protection against discrimination. Amendments to the relevant public health laws were also needed, he added.

The speakers noted that illiteracy and backwardness was increasing the risk of the spread of HIV/Aids as due to the lack of awareness, people appeared reluctant to disclose that they might have been infected.

Blood screening of immigrants and tourists was not in vogue which, they said, was aggravating the situation.

Speaker of the Sindh Assembly Muzaffar Hussain Shah, Dr Noor Jehan Panezai and President of the Aga Khan University Dr Shams Lakha were among others who spoke at the seminar.—PPI/APP

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