

AIDS is everyone's concern

Stakeholders sign World AIDS Day resolution



PLEDGE: Federal Minister for Health Nasir Khan signing the World AIDS Day 2005 Resolution in Islamabad.

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ISLAMABAD: HIV and AIDS is everyone's concern. This realisation was amply reflected at a stakeholders meeting where the government, together with donors, the civil society, youth and media — among other sectors — unanimously signed a World AIDS Day 2005 Resolution that presupposes their collective involvement in the fight against a disease that is assuming the contours of a transnational pandemic.

With Federal Minister for Health Nasir Khan in the lead role, the resolution was signed here Friday by representatives of Unicef, UNAIDS, World Health Organisation and People Living With HIV and AIDS (PLWAs). The stakeholders' meeting was organised by the National AIDS Control Programme (NACP) under the project 'Delivery of Behaviour Change Communication Services through television and radio channels, print media and inter-personal communication interventions' of the Enhanced HIV/AIDS Control Programme.

The resolution makes it mandatory for all stakeholders to raise national awareness with a view to eliminating the stigma and discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS; to fight the culture of denial; to strengthen the capacity of the social partners and the media to address the pandemic; to coordinate

partnership arrangement. HIV/AIDS is a multi-faceted transnational risk, and advocacy has a key role to play in ensuring that all the partners and various aspects of the epidemic, including policy-related issues, receive attention in the public sphere, he commented.

Unicef Country Representative Omar Abdi primarily focused on the greater risk of HIV infection faced by youth. "Over 99% of young people in Pakistan are HIV negative and we need to keep them that way," he hoped. Unicef is supporting the government in developing a National HIV Prevention Strategy for Young People.

Freelance journalist Huma Khawar made a presentation on media and HIV/AIDS. She identified inadequate coverage, publication of stories based on misinformation and sensationalism; use of unethical language and terms; and stigmatisation of PLWAs as the major problems. Huma enumerated the factors responsible for inadequate media coverage of HIV/AIDS, and concluded by focusing on the media's role in promoting a congenial environment for effective reporting on the subject.

The civil society perspective was shared by the national programme manager of the Pakistan National AIDS Consortium, Quaker Brig Aldo Lank, country coordinator of the UNAIDS, assured fullest cooperation of UNAIDS in the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The

Guide," developed by NACP with the assistance of Unicef, was also distributed among journalists. The booklet lists preferred terms against those that should be avoided while reporting on HIV/AIDS. Nasir Khan too advised the media to demonstrate utmost sensitivity while reporting, lest stigma and discrimination prevent people from coming forward for case detection and treatment. Another highlight of the meeting was the launching of the website of NACP.

According to the UNAIDS 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, the number of PLWAs worldwide stands at 53 million (adults: 38.6m, women: 19.2 million, and children: 3.2 million); while 5 million are newly infected with HIV, and 3.1 million have died of AIDS. In South Asia, more than 5 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. India tops the list with an estimated 4,000,000 cases, followed by Pakistan (74,000), Nepal (51,000), Bangladesh (13,000) Sri Lanka (3,500) and Bhutan and Maldives less than 100 cases each.

Starting official figures, NACP Manager Dr. Asma Bokhari said, Pakistan had reported 3,073 cases of HIV and AIDS till September 2005. Of these, 2,741 were HIV positive cases, and 332 were full-blown AIDS cases. She termed limited non-health and private sector involvement; difficult accessibility to high-risk groups; and secret focus on youth as the core challenges in

the prevention of HIV/AIDS. The