

A news roundup of the XV International Conference on AIDS in Bangkok, Thailand that took place in July 2004.



COMMENTARY

As the AIDS Bureaucracy Cashes In, the Prospect of a Cure Dims

By James P. Pinkerton

August 6, 2004

The big news on AIDS is that there is no news. After 20 million deaths over 25 years, there should be some news — of a vaccine, of a cure — but there's nothing on the horizon. And in no small part, it's because politics has squeezed out science.

Last month I traveled to Bangkok to cover the 15th World AIDS Conference. Many luminaries — Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela, CEOs of various pharmaceutical companies, actress Ashley Judd — were there, all talking The Language of Concern and Compassion. But nobody talked seriously about a vaccine or a cure; the phantom of this opera was the prospect of actually eradicating the virus.

Activists blame the U.S. government and the pharmaceutical companies. Uncle Sam, they say, underfunds condom distribution. Given the activists' antipathy to abstinence-eager Texans, it probably won't do much good to point out that the dreaded Bush administration is spending more on condoms than Clinton's ever did. This year, the U.S. Agency for International Development is expected to donate more than 500 million condoms to poor countries around the world.

The "Big Pharma" story is less straightforward. Activists say the drug companies have underfunded R&D. But the truth is that the drug makers have spent tens of billions of dollars on fighting AIDS. Now, however, they are quietly pulling back. Why? Because they no longer see profits ahead. The drug companies are being pressured into basically giving away their existing anti-AIDS meds in Third World countries, home to 95% of the 38 million people infected with the virus.

Even so, they are routinely vilified; the chief of Pfizer, Hank McKinnell, was booed off the stage in Bangkok. If a pharmaceutical company were to come up with an AIDS-smiting "silver bullet," Magic Johnson would gladly pay the sticker price, while everyone else would demand it free. If you're Pfizer, it's hard to make money that way.

Absent any short-term hope for a cure, the activists seem determined to make the band play on — that is, to preserve maximum sexual freedom for all, no matter what the cost. In Bangkok, all discussions on abstinence were dismissed; out in front of the convention center was a giant condom, described as a "victory monument."

In the lobby stood a display honoring — yes, that's the right word — sex workers; the Debby Project, the Australian art protest troupe that sponsored the exhibit, declared: "It is not necessarily degrading to have intimacy with strangers. In fact, it is one of the most liberating things you can experience."

Tragically, avant-garde thinking on AIDS is returning to where it was two decades ago: No pesky disease should get in the way of sexual liberation. That was the overwhelming message, and it's a killer. In the words of Abner Mason, a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV and AIDS, who was appalled by what he witnessed in Bangkok: "They think they're defending a lifestyle. But actually, they're creating a death-style."

But now there's a new twist: The creation of a permanent, self-perpetuating AIDS bureaucracy that has a vested interest in maintaining the disease but little interest in curing it. For every case of AIDS today, somebody — usually a middleman of the type well represented in Bangkok — gets money.

The world now spends about \$4.7 billion a year on AIDS. About two-thirds of that comes from the U.S. And both governments and nongovernmental organizations have figured out that if they make enough noise, they can get even more for AIDS treatment. President Bush has pledged to spend an additional \$15 billion over five years, and John Kerry has pledged to double that.

And of course, any number of big-name foundations — Bill Gates, Bill Clinton, Elton John — are writing checks too. Thus has "Big AIDS" — the network of caregivers, consciousness-raisers and, of course, condom distributors — become a big business. Five million people contracted HIV last year — and as for the next 5 million, they're worth billions too, according to a grim dollars-for-dying formula.

In this new environment, when funding streams correlate with victim streams, the vision of a cure as a goal yields instead to perpetuation as a goal.

And if perma-funding for the dying becomes the new "mode of production" — that is, a lucrative career path for the press-savvy and the politics-connected — then a legitimating superstructure of ideology will emerge. Indeed, I heard it articulated by Gregg Gonsalves of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City, who told fellow activists in Bangkok that the key to fighting the AIDS epidemic was "documenting the work of the community, tapping into the community, acknowledging the work of communities."

As for science? It seems that people power is more important than laboratory power. Amid all this well-funded sound and fury, the AIDS virus survives. Unimpeded by

vaccines, unthreatened by eradicating medicine, it is free to continue striking, infecting and — following what scientists know as a Darwinian inevitability — mutating into newer and more lethal forms.

James P. Pinkerton is a fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington.

The New York Times
July 20, 2004 Tuesday
Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section F; Column 3; Health & Fitness; THE DOCTOR'S WORLD; Pg. 6

A Political Circus Is Part of the AIDS Meeting

BYLINE: By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN, M.D.

DATELINE: BANGKOK, July 19

The 15th International AIDS Conference that ended here last week after six days of pageantry, speeches from world leaders and demonstrations by advocates was an unrecognizable descendant of the first meeting, in Atlanta in 1985.

That meeting, held four years after the discovery of AIDS, was conducted over three days in the sterile and somber atmosphere of a scientific meeting. There were only 2,100 scientists and they were trying to figure out why a new disease had suddenly appeared. I recall their curiosity as they tried to decipher the rapidly emerging but tentative medical findings and sought ways to detect and treat the puzzling new syndrome.

In contrast, the Bangkok AIDS conference, the largest so far, drew more than 17,000 delegates. **Science took a back seat** to the concurrent sessions on social, economic, legal, policy making and other aspects of AIDS.

Three elephants depicted on the conference logo became an unintentional symbol of the boisterous political circuses that AIDS conferences have become. The conference's circus atmosphere even affected top public health leaders like Dr. Peter Piot, who directs the United Nations AIDS program.

In a jocular yet serious AIDS prevention effort on the eve of the conference, Dr. Piot went to a Bangkok toll booth to hand to drivers the condoms that are the main weapon in controlling the spread of H.I.V. The toll booth scene was a variant on a Thai police program, known as cops and rubbers, to hand out condoms in traffic.

"No one was embarrassed, and some asked for more condoms," Dr. Piot told me of the experience that he shared with Mechai Viravaidya, a Thai senator whose efforts to promote condom use and safer sex helped prevent millions of Thais from getting infected over the last decade.

The transformation of the AIDS conferences from austere scientific meetings to mammoth jamborees is due to two main factors. One is that AIDS has become one of the worst epidemics in history, killing more than 20 million people so far, mostly in Africa. Second, conferences are now less focused on a failure to find a cure for the disease and more on the failure to deliver the many treatments now available.

At the time of the Atlanta conference the AIDS virus had yet to be named H.I.V. There were no effective anti-retroviral drugs. Some doctors were shunning AIDS patients.

Hospital workers left meals at their doors. Many others feared they might become infected from casual contact despite epidemiological evidence to the contrary. Fewer than 10,000 cases were reported in the United States, mostly among gay men, injecting drug users and hemophiliacs. But the case count was doubling every six months.

Dr. Helene Gayle, an official of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the new president of the International AIDS Society, which co-organizes the conferences, said she attended the Atlanta conference out of curiosity, not because of a feeling of an impending pandemic. Dr. Gayle told me that when she joined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 1984, superiors counseled her to avoid involvement in AIDS because it was "an oddball disease" that would soon disappear.

Few participants at that time were aware of how H.I.V. was swiftly spreading to devastate Africa. The only three African participants were from what was then called Zaire and came with Dr. Piot, who was working there at the time.

In Atlanta, I recall none of the demonstrations that soon began to be conference fixtures as advocates increasingly scolded scientists and government officials for their seeming lack of urgency to discover new therapies and deliver them. In some ways, the demonstrators have helped focus attention on the magnitude of the pandemic. The meetings have grown so large and diverse that the fastest and most diligent participant can attend only a small percentage of the presentations because many meeting rooms are acres apart.

The conferences also have become big business with many commercial exhibitors. In Vancouver in 1996, there was electrifying news that combinations of anti-retroviral drugs could keep H.I.V. in check. Reports in Durban, South Africa, in 2000 and Barcelona, Spain, in 2002 are now credited with playing major roles in lowering the price of the anti-retroviral drugs and setting the stage for their delivery to people in poor countries.

The United States contributes more money for AIDS than any other country. Yet participants in Bangkok still harshly criticized the Bush administration for doing too little, emphasizing a policy of abstinence and severely restricting the number of government scientists allowed to attend the conference. Two federal agencies, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health, have been strong forces in earlier conferences. Yet the Bush administration did not allow some scientists to travel to Bangkok to discuss their papers that had been accepted for presentation.

No conference has been held in the United States since 1990 as a protest against the government's policy to refuse visas to H.I.V.-infected people. Keeping AIDS in the news has become a main goal. Bangkok was chosen as the conference site largely to galvanize media attention on Asia and to educate heads of state and other political leaders on how to prevent the devastation that has struck Africa.

Nelson Mandela, the former president of South Africa; Yuwari Musaveni, president of

Uganda; and Kofi Annan, the secretary general of the United Nations, lent their prestige. Mr. Annan described AIDS as a "weapon of mass destruction" and urged the Bush administration to battle H.I.V. as fervently as it has terrorism.

Mr. Annan told the BBC: "We hear a lot about weapons of mass destruction, we hear a lot about terrorism. And we are worried about weapons of mass destruction because of the potential to kill thousands. Here we have an epidemic that is killing millions. We really do need a leadership."

But, at the same time, the Thai government had to cancel a summit meeting on AIDS because of 10 heads of state the Thais invited, only Mr. Musaveni accepted. He told health workers that to educate people about H.I.V., they must drop their professorial approach and become more like politicians and celebrities. Participants proved the point as they jammed sessions to hear Richard Gere and watch MTV's new global public service announcements.

It is too soon to know the legacy of the Bangkok meeting. In the end, it may be that both scientific advances and political circuses have useful roles in stopping the spread of AIDS.

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The New York Times

July 16, 2004 Friday

Late Edition - Final

SECTION: Section A; Column 2; Editorial Desk; Pg. 21

Bragging in Bangkok

By Laurie Garrett.

Laurie Garrett, a senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, is the author, most recently, of "Betrayal of Trust: The Collapse of Global Public Health."

DATELINE: BANGKOK

For the 15th time in some 20 years, thousands of people from around the world have gathered to discuss the AIDS pandemic, this time in Bangkok. If these gatherings are good for anything, it is to offer a window on the course of the world's worst plague, which has by now infected some 70 million people, killing about 30 million. **The view from Bangkok 2004 is disheartening, even appalling.**

What began in 1985 as an annual gathering of scientists, aimed at sharing laboratory findings and information from the battlefronts in the war on H.I.V., has been transformed into a meeting of 17,000 consultants, bureaucrats and activists fighting one another for money to build a huge global AIDS treatment program, employing tens of thousands of people.

There is good news: we have embarked on the most extensive humanitarian venture in world history. It's doable because the prices for life-extending anti-H.I.V. medicines have dropped to a mere \$150 a year from a high of about \$15,000. Political leaders have finally embraced the AIDS problem, and an international mechanism for channeling funds from the rich world to the poor -- the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria -- is up and running. Roughly 40 million people today are living with H.I.V. The best reckoning is that about a third of them are at a stage in their disease where they would, if they lived in the United States, be receiving antiretroviral drugs to keep them alive. Though nearly all of them are very poor, it is estimated about 440,000 of them have the precious medicine.

The drugs are, however, far from perfect -- they cause a host of side effects and may be outwitted by mutated, drug-resistant viruses. We need better drugs. We need a vaccine. And ultimately we need to find a way to cure this terrible disease. That requires science.

But this Bangkok gathering is witnessing the worst science ever presented at an AIDS meeting. Nearly half the scientific presentations expected simply failed to

materialize, leaving bare white walls where there were supposed to be thousands of bits of useful data. To be blunt, top H.I.V. laboratory researchers simply don't come to the international gathering anymore, finding it irrelevant. Further, many scientists who work for the United States government could not attend. The Bush administration said it was because of budget cuts, although critics slammed it as a political move.

Nine months ago, the World Health Organization adopted a plan called "3x5," setting a target of getting three million poor people on antiretroviral drugs by the end of 2005. The United Nations Agency did this without any financial backing or powerful support in the wealthy world, and it seems doomed.

The clock is ticking. We are 18 months away from W.H.O.'s self-appointed deadline. And the pool of new H.I.V. infections grows at a rate of 8,000 a day. The Global Business Coalition on H.I.V./AIDS, which includes more than 140 of the world's largest corporations, announced this week that 50 million people will have to be tested in order to find the roughly 2.6 million who need to get on the drugs in time to meet the 3x5 goal. That alone constitutes the most exhaustive public health effort in history.

But this week, W.H.O. officials said their 3x5 program was "just short" of the July goal of 500,000 in treatment, laying claim to all the estimated 440,000 people in the poor world now on the drugs. Randall Tobias, the coordinator of President Bush's AIDS relief plan, also claimed some of those in treatment, and his assistants here said the United States is the biggest financier of H.I.V. treatment programs in the world. That drew a shout from a representative of the European Union; Europe is the world's most generous AIDS donor. Humanitarian and church groups also want credit, and the money that goes with it.

This ugly jockeying for glory and dollars in a sort of race to count saved human heads is worsened by controversies over the Global Fund. It has committed only about \$900 million for its next round of grants to poor countries and nongovernmental organizations, though it has received more than \$3.6 billion in applications deemed scientifically sound. Mr. Tobias took aim at the fund, saying it should no longer receive large donations from the United States because it had failed to disperse money in a timely manner. That, he said, justifies his country's go-it-alone approach, directing money to 15 countries whose programs are closely managed by the United States Agency for International Development.

Meanwhile, a new Global Fund report shows that of the 25 projects supported by the fund for more than a year, 80 percent have already either achieved or even surpassed their five-year goals. As chaotic as it is, Haiti surpassed its 2006 targets after only a year of Global Fund support. Botswana has built a system for delivering the life-sparing drugs to a quarter of its H.I.V. population, and plans to have half of them -- 50,000 people -- on antiretrovirals before December. Lesego Motsumi, Botswana's minister of health, told me over lunch this week that she

considered it outrageous for W.H.O. or the White House to take credit for Botswana's achievements.

"Whoever makes those claims, they should show you the patients they say they have treated," Ms. Motsumi said. "Because we can show you ours. These groups shouldn't make numbers claims unless they can back them up."

While the grab for glory and dollars continues, everybody seems to be losing sight of the real targets: vaccines, cures, better and safer drugs, microbicides and other tools women can use to protect themselves against infection.

Scientists I know all over the world are demoralized. They have hit extraordinary intellectual obstacles in trying to outwit this dastardly microbe. They no longer feel part of this international AIDS community and have no global platform. And were they here today in Bangkok, they would discover to their sad amazement that few of the 17,000 people in attendance care. They are far too busy offering up their services as consultants.

July 14, 2004

International AIDS Conference, Bangkok, Thailand

Interview With Ambassador Randall Tobias at the International AIDS Conference

Ambassador Randall Tobias, Head of the U.S. State Department's Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator, on Wednesday at the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok discussed U.S. HIV/AIDS policy in an interview with Kaiser Family Foundation Senior Fellow Jackie Judd for kaisernetwork.org, the official conference webcaster. The following are highlights from the interview. To view the entire interview, visit <http://www.kaisernetwork.org/aids2004/tobias> .

"It's disappointing because this year for example the United States will commit almost twice as much to fighting international HIV/AIDS than the rest of the world's donor governments combined. So, in the context of the facts, it really makes no sense. But I think there are a number of people who have broader agendas that this kind of gets caught up in."

"Either intentionally or honestly, there are large numbers of people who simply are confused or misinformed or intentionally want to misunderstand what our strategy is."

"Our strategy is A and B and C; abstinence works, being faithful works, condoms work. They all have a role, but it's not a multiple-choice test where there's one right answer; all of the things have a place and they have a place in the President's emergency plan."

"One of the tragedies of the culture that's developed around this conference is that a relatively small number of people have commanded a very disproportionate share of attention, certainly of the media and probably of the people attending the conference, and as a result of that, attention is not being directed at the other aspects of the conference where people could be exchanging ideas I think a little more efficiently than perhaps takes place."

"You really need to say was the value that was generated by this kind of a conference worth that kind of money or could part of that money be spent more efficiently in some other directions in order to fight HIV/AIDS."

"There is a kind of an industry that's developed of people who spend their time talking to each other, and as others who have said who have been engaged in this a lot longer than I have, we really need to do the kinds of things that this Conference is intended to do, but we also need to focus more and more of our energy and attention on getting at it. And really getting at the implementation of treatment, prevention and care programs, and so **I think there really needs to be some evaluation before the next conference."**

"I think we need to evaluate, as we tried to do this year, not so much the absolute numbers, but whether or not the right people are coming who really

have a need and a reason to be here, and that the value that is generated by the cost of bringing them here, is something that's justified as opposed to putting that money in other parts of our HIV efforts."

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

July 2, 2004

<http://www.washtimes.com/national/20040701-115924-3861r.htm>

HHS cuts group for AIDS forum

By Joyce Howard Price

A total of 60 scientists from the Department of Health and Human Services will be attending the 15th International AIDS Conference this month in Bangkok, about a quarter of the number who attended the last conference in Spain two years ago.

The reduced presence of Americans at the July 11-16 conference has prompted criticism by some members of Congress and by AIDS activists.

But a spokesman for HHS Tommy G. Thompson defended the change, noting that the government spent \$3.6 million to send 236 persons to the AIDS conference in Barcelona in 2002.

The spokesman, William Pierce, said department officials concluded, "This was not the best use of resources in fighting diseases. We felt we could use our resources better."

He noted that "millions of dollars of taxpayers' money" have been spent to send hundreds of HHS employees to various conferences around the world. Mr. Pierce said because of concerns about the appropriateness of such expenditures, HHS formalized a new policy last summer that affects attendance at all international conferences.

"The policy says that any time any one agency sends 20 people [to a conference], we'd like to review it," the HHS spokesman said. "The bottom line is what is the best use of taxpayers' money?"

Mr. Pierce said it will cost about \$250,000 to send 50 HHS employees to Thailand.

Another 10, he said, will be going from posts in Asia.

In addition, he said, the government will spend another \$250,000 to sponsor conference attendance for 80 representatives of countries in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean that receive emergency U.S. help in fighting the AIDS epidemic. The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) will also send 74 representatives.

Some Democrats in Congress denounced the new policy after reports that 28 researchers from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

were forced to cancel presentations at the Bangkok AIDS conference as a result of the attendance cutbacks.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman of California, ranking Democrat on the House Committee on Government Reform, and Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, New York Democrat, sent a letter to Mr. Thompson, criticizing the move and asking him to reconsider.

"We are writing to protest your decision to stop over two dozen U.S. scientists from presenting peer-reviewed studies and leading research seminars for international colleagues at this summer's International AIDS Conference," the House members said in their letter dated June 24. "By grounding these experts, you are keeping them from learning from their peers around the world, and you are depriving the world of scientific leadership by the United States."

Mr. Pierce said the CDC had known since last year it could send only 20 representatives to the AIDS conference and had overbooked in violation of the new travel restrictions established for HHS employees.

The information these scientists would have presented in person in Bangkok could be presented via teleconferences, he said. "With all the modern technology available, there's not a great need to actually be somewhere," said Mr. Pierce.

Mr. Pierce characterized the objections raised by House Democrats as "more about politics than any kind of genuine concern."

In a related development, a study of more than 1,000 Tanzanian women -- pregnant and infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS -- found that daily doses of multivitamins appear to slow down the disease and cut in half the risk of getting full-blown AIDS.

The research, led by scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health and published in the New England Journal of Medicine, found that malnourished women who took a combination of vitamins B,C, and E maintained a higher level of immune cells that allowed them to fight HIV. After six years, 25 percent of women on the multivitamins developed AIDS or died, compared with 31 percent of those who took placebos.

HIV/AIDS SUMMIT: Accessibility of drugs tops PM's agenda

By Arthit Khwankhom

Thaksin says leaders of 13 countries have confirmed attendance

The leaders of at least 13 countries will attend a summit in Bangkok to discuss how to make anti-retroviral medication accessible to all people with HIV/Aids, including breaking drug patents, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra said yesterday.

The summit will take place during the 15th International Aids Conference in Bangkok from July 11 to 16.

Thaksin said the summit, scheduled for July 12 at Government House, would be the first of its kind and would aim to put the leaders' vision into reality.

The 13 leaders who have confirmed attendance include the prime ministers of China, India and Russia, and the presidents of Uganda, Nigeria and Brazil.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and Madame Grace Machel, the wife of Nelson Mandela - former president of South Africa - will also attend.

Public Health Minister Sudarat Keyuraphan said leaders of other countries, including Canada, may also attend the summit.

The summit will focus on how to make the life-saving drugs accessible to all HIV-positive people who need them, Thaksin said.

Some countries whose leaders are attending the meeting are capable of producing more anti-retroviral drugs than they need - such as India, Brazil and Thailand -- and they can supply free or low-cost drugs to countries that need them, Thaksin said.

Thailand will increase production of anti-retroviral drugs to supply neighbouring countries, he added.

Sudarat said Thailand could produce enough anti-retroviral drugs for 200,000 people, while only about 70,000 Thais need them.

Thaksin said he would also use the summit to convey a message to the world that HIV-positive people can live in society.

He would invite people with HIV/Aids and selected journalists to a lunch with the leaders immediately following the summit, he said.

Thaksin said Thailand would also host a conference of health ministers from 38 countries and a number of forums for international non-governmental organisations working on HIV/Aids.

The summit and the ministerial conference would both produce declarations that must be implemented by the signatories, he added.

Thaksin said he would also meet activists planning to rally outside the plenary hall of the International Aids Conference.

The conference will include speeches by celebrities, including Richard Gere, the premier said, adding that with more than 30,000 participants expected, including national leaders, security measures similar to those used for the Apec summit will be put in place.

Dr Charal Trinvuthipong, director-general of the Disease Control Department, said Thaksin had approved his proposal to let young people discuss where condom-vending machines should be installed.

Some academics have opposed the installation of the machines on college and university campuses.

Preventing HIV infection among young people will be a focus of the International Aids Conference because they have been identified as a high-risk group.

"They are very aware that a condom can save them from contracting HIV yet they feel embarrassed to get one at some places like convenience stores," Charal said.

"So listen to them to find out how to make it easier for them to reach for the only tool that can protect them," he added.

Three million free condoms will be distributed during the conference - at the main venue, the Impact Arena, and at expressway toll booths between Muang Thong Thani and downtown Bangkok.

"An infinite supply" of condoms available for International AIDS Conference participants

Looks like the International AIDS Conference Community Co-chairs are planning for more than an exchange of scientific data at the upcoming conference in Bangkok, Thailand. As the P.S. in their "words of welcome" states "Don't worry if you forget to pack your condoms - we have an infinite supply!"

(On-line at <http://www.ias.se/bangkok/subpage.aspx?pageld=154> , click on Welcome (by the Community Co-chairs) in left hand column or scroll to bottom)

Words of Welcome

On behalf of the Community Program Committee - Sawasdee krap (which means "welcome" in Thai). The Thai community is mobilised and actively preparing a special experience for you in the unique Thai way.

At the previous International AIDS Conference in Barcelona in 2002, the issue of "accountability" was recurrent. It was made clear that some critical areas are non-negotiable. "Bangkok will be a time for accountability" was an echo heard from many key stakeholders. We cannot simply keep repeating the same mistakes, continue to not respect commitments and expect AIDS to go away. We are dealing with real people's lives.

It will be a long road from Barcelona to Bangkok. However, our communities continue to respond as they have from the very beginning: from educating and trying to protect our communities from further spread, to caring for those who are ill and grieving those that we have lost. We still face discrimination and stigmatization; we still face inadequate policies; we still lack resources and medication, especially the life-saving antiretroviral, which is only available to a handful of people, primarily in developed countries. But, in spite of all this, we continue.

Leaders must be held accountable for non-action or poor track records. A vaccine needs to be developed to help save millions of lives. Respect for human rights has to be ensured and defended. More resources and new approaches in distribution are needed to ensure that those affected are reached. People living with HIV/AIDS must have access to much needed medication and care in its broadest sense. Innovative ways for communities to achieve socio-economic sustainability need to be developed and shared. Our leaders must be committed to dialogue and action with civil society - a big challenge that will be discussed and assessed in Bangkok.

We are working within a framework called the "Unified Program", which will provide greater integration of community and scientific perspectives throughout the tracks and in additional sessions with varied styles and formats. There will also be dedicated

community sessions dealing with issues needing broader analysis. The highly-popular skills building program has been expanded to offer an even greater range of sessions to develop practical skills to apply and share at home. Together, with our committee and our advisors from around the world, we are shaping an exciting program, the fruit of much consultation and deliberation.

So many people will not be able to make the journey to Bangkok because their health will not permit it, or because of AIDS they will have taken another journey, or simply because they cannot afford to come. All of us who will be in Bangkok need to remember those who will not be there and make sure that lessons learned and networking opportunities are brought back to our communities at home.

We share your hopes and aspirations that the Conference theme “Access for All” will become a reality. The XV International AIDS Conference should serve to move us towards a better future - not in steps but in leaps and bounds! Join us to make it happen! We look forward to seeing you in Bangkok.

Senator Mechai Viravaidya - Community Co-chair
Mr. Donald de Gagne - Community Co-chair

PS: Don't worry if you forget to pack your condoms - we have an infinite supply!

A hotel hosting a session of the upcoming International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand is segregating those attending the conference. The management said it would not have agreed to even host the event had they known the participants may have HIV. This is outrageous. Furthermore, while millions around the world living with HIV go without access to AIDS medication, it is revealed by this scandal that participants at the conference are staying at this four star hotel! All rather ironic since the conference's theme is "Access for all."

Agence France Presse

June 17, 2004 Thursday 7:32 AM Eastern Time

Thai hotel accused of HIV discrimination ahead of AIDS conference

DATELINE: BANGKOK, June 17

Thai AIDS activists accused a Bangkok hotel on Thursday of discriminating against HIV-positive people, just three weeks before some 20,000 delegates were to converge here for a global forum on the virus.

The activists said staff at the four-star Prince Palace hotel had moved people with HIV who were at a conference on HIV-AIDS it hosted this month to a single, isolated floor and cordoned off a dining area to separate them from other guests.

"This is not the first time this has happened," said Nimit Tienudom, director of the AIDS Access Foundation, of the hotel's handling of the meeting between government officials and people living with HIV-AIDS.

"We have to accept that there is still discrimination against AIDS patients," Nimit told AFP, adding that the incident reflected the government's poor efforts to inform the Thai public about the virus.

"It showed that the government should not solve problems case by case, they need to do more to educate people that both patients and non-affected people can live together," he said.

Nimit said **the hotel's management argued they would not have agreed to host the session had they known who was attending.** But the activist said that disclosing the delegates' HIV status would violate their right to privacy.

Sombat Thanprasertsuk, director of the government's Bureau of AIDS, Tuberculosis and Sexually Transmitted Infections, said he was made aware of the hotel's actions and vowed better education programs by the health ministry.

"There are some people who don't want to be involved with AIDS patients because they don't understand the disease," Sombat told AFP.

"If the hotel discriminated like that, then we have to tell them there is nothing to be concerned about" when interacting with people living with HIV.

The Prince Palace hotel conceded in a statement Thursday that it had moved delegates to a single floor after discovering some were HIV-positive, but defended its actions saying that it should have been forewarned.

"People who complain should think of the staff's human rights too, and ways they can protect themselves," the hotel said.

However, the hotel said the segregated dining arrangements were aimed at convenience rather than discrimination, and that all delegates had been placed together on the same floor, not just those with HIV-AIDS.

"The hotel and the organiser agreed that both people with HIV and conference staff were to stay on the same floor for the convenience of taking care of guests and the convenience of (hotel) staff," it said.

Some staff may have caused offence or acted inappropriately due to what the hotel management described as "a lack of information", it added.

From July 11 to 16 Thailand is hosting the 15th International AIDS Conference, a United Nations-sponsored forum bringing together thousands of delegates and several world leaders.

Thailand has long received international praise for its efforts to combat the HIV-AIDS pandemic, particularly in the 1990s when it ran a pragmatic campaign to halt the spread of the virus.

National Public Radio (NPR)
SHOW: Morning Edition (10:00 AM ET) - NPR
June 23, 2004 Wednesday

AIDS conference

ANCHORS: RENEE MONTAGNE
REPORTERS: RICHARD KNOX

RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

President Bush today will add Vietnam to the list of countries eligible for emergency funding to fight AIDS. It's the first Asian country to qualify, but the Bush administration is coming under criticism for drastically cutting its support for the 15th International AIDS Conference in Bangkok next month. Washington is sending about 50 federal scientists and policy people to Bangkok. At the last conference, two years ago in Barcelona, the US sent nearly five times that number. NPR's Richard Knox reports on what happened and why it matters.

Protesters: Money for AIDS. Stop the war. Gun control.

RICHARD KNOX reporting:

In Barcelona two summers ago, protesters disrupted the conference's final session. Nothing unusual about that. The International AIDS Conference has always been a unique blend of science and activism.

Unidentified Man: The US has refused to give its fair share to the global fund.

KNOX: But the Barcelona protesters may have touched off far-reaching consequences when they drowned out a speech by Tommy Thompson, the US Secretary of Health and Human Service.

Secretary TOMMY THOMPSON (US Department of Health and Human Services): While in South Africa, we visited an orphanage where all the children wanted was to be picked up and hugged.

KNOX: Bill Pierce, Thompson's spokesman, makes no secret that the administration was irked by Thompson's rude reception, but Pierce insists that has nothing to do with the limits on attendance in Bangkok or the fact that HHS has cut conference funding by 85 percent.

Mr. BILL PIERCE (Tommy Thompson's Spokesman): We're just simply saying that as an organization that must also look at money spent on behalf of the taxpayers, this is the best way to spend money on behalf of the taxpayer and we are...

KNOX: Pierce says the drastic cut in federal attendees and US government funding will not damage America's global prestige in AIDS science and programs.

Mr. PIERCE: And this, in no way, will affect either one of those positions that we hold in the world.

KNOX: No other country does as much AIDS research as the United States. Conference organizers say US researchers have cancelled dozens of scientific presentations and lectures because of the new restrictions. The Global AIDS Conference is not the only one that has lost US government support. Officials recently pulled funding from the largest domestic AIDS meeting, the US Conference on AIDS, scheduled for this fall. One of the most vocal critics of government support for AIDS conferences is Representative Mark Souder, a Republican from Indiana. The congressman wasn't available for comment, but his aide, Roland Foster, says the government spends too much on conferences.

Mr. ROLAND FOSTER (Aide to Congressman Mark Souder): Now in the United States, there's over 1,600 American on waiting lists for AIDS drugs. For just \$16 million of the money that would otherwise go to conferences, you could completely eliminate those waiting lists.

KNOX: Dr. Joep Lange is president of the International AIDS Society, which sponsors the Global AIDS Conferences. Lange doesn't buy the argument that the US government just doesn't have enough money.

Dr. JOEP LANGE (President, International AIDS Society): The official reason is that they thought that too much money was going to conference attendance, which is strange in the light of the fact that there's a \$15 billion pledge to fight HIV/AIDS. That's all games. They're really playing games.

KNOX: Lange says the game is partly to pressure conference sponsors into showcasing religious groups who promote a certain approach to AIDS prevention, emphasizing sexual abstinence above all else. Those faith-based groups tend to oppose the approach called harm reduction that favors condom use, safer sex and providing sterile needles to drug users. Congressman Souder has complained loudly about what he sees as the conference's bias against faith-based groups. Again, Roland Foster.

Mr. FOSTER: There was very few faith-based groups invited to either participate or even present at the last conference, and that's one of the questions we've asked for the upcoming conference: Now how many faith-based groups will be presenting and how many will be speaking?

KNOX: In Bangkok, the conference will have a new session on religion and AIDS, and Lange says when it comes to presenting new data, there's no bias against faith-based organizations.

Dr. LANGE: There's never been that bias, but if they don't send in stuff, I mean you're not going around and introducing a bias in favor of faith-based organizations. And if they don't submit good stuff, then that's too bad.

KNOX: Concern about government pressure around AIDS extends beyond conference funding. People in some AIDS groups say many scientists and organizations who receive federal funds feel intimidated about speaking out on sensitive public health topics. Judy Auerbach is with the American Foundation for AIDS Research or amfAR.

Ms. JUDY AUERBACH (American Foundation for AIDS Research): The message seems to be that if the US government supports an activity, that activity has to comport

with the president's stated agenda, and if it doesn't and if you speak out against the president's stated agenda, you're going to be punished.

KNOX: Roland Foster dismisses the notion that Congress or the Bush administration is punishing the centers and the scientific community. He says it's ironic that scientists who engage in what he calls political activity act shocked when they get a political response.

Looks like the International AIDS Conference planners are expecting more, a lot more, than just science to be exchanged at the upcoming conference in Bangkok!

The Nation (Thailand)
June 24, 2004, Thursday

Condoms to greet tourists

Aside from the famous Siamese smile, tourists who step foot in Thailand from July 8-16 will be greeted with a condom, to mark the Kingdom's role in hosting the XV World HIV/Aids Conference.

About 350,000 condoms are set to be given away during the period, when more than 20,000 delegates from across the world are expected to descend on Bangkok.

On July 6, condoms will be distributed to motorists who use the expressways during the conference, as well as travellers at Hualamphong Train Station, according to Senator Mechai Viravaidya, who is chairman of the Population and Community Development Association (PDA).

'The condoms will come in two sizes. The ones given away at the airport will be of a larger size. The others are to fit Thais,' Mechai said, adding that if the volume of condoms was not enough, more would be supplied.

As part of the campaign, police officers will also distribute condoms to motorists stuck in traffic.

PDA is the main non-profit organisation promoting the use of condoms as a means to control birth rates and the spread of HIV/Aids.

Mechai, who was in charge of Aids prevention during the Anand administration, expressed satisfaction with Thailand's attempts to control the spread of the disease.

'During 1991-1992, about 250,000 people were infected annually. Now, the number has fallen to 16,000. It's been an immense success,' he said.

Agence France Presse
June 29, 2004 Tuesday

Activists fume over cost of 'access for all' AIDS conference in Bangkok

DATELINE: BANGKOK, June 29

Activists railed Tuesday over the 1,000-dollar registration fee for next month's largest-ever AIDS conference, claiming thousands of key voices on the pandemic would not be heard.

The 15th International AIDS Conference expects up to 20,000 delegates in Bangkok for the July 11 to 16 event, which this year has the theme of "Access for All".

"It's access for all except if you're a poor person," said advocacy coordinator Karyn Kaplan of the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group, one of hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) expected to attend.

"It's one of the most expensive AIDS conferences to date, which is ironic given that this is in a developing country," she told AFP. "The reality is that access is still very limited."

She said activists could protest by printing fake passes and to gather in large numbers to force their way in. She also urged delegates to place stickers over their own badges.

Organisers have slapped a 1,000-dollar price tag on registration after May 1, while Thai taxation pushes it to 1,250 dollars. Early registration had been 800 dollars and standard had been 900 dollars.

The fee covers access to all conference sessions and copies of the related documents and reports. Accommodation and meals are not included.

Nimit Tien-udom, director of Thailand's ACCESS Foundation, said NGOs had been at loggerheads with organisers for months over the cost.

"We have tried many times to raise this point in committee meetings. If the registration price is lowered, we can have many more attendees... but they have not made any changes," he said.

Conference director Mats Ahnlund, of the International AIDS Society (IAS), acknowledged that the cost was high but said it was 50 dollars cheaper than the previous gathering in Barcelona, Spain, and it was no different from other medical conferences.

"The IAS is small and we have to cover our costs. This is a not-for-profit event but we cannot subsidise it all," he told AFP.

"I am sure they are concerned," he said of the activists.

IAS has allocated some 2,300 scholarships for people to attend, half of them from outside Thailand, while 3,000 Thai students have been invited at no charge, Ahnlund added.

IAS is promoting a "global village" area on the fringes of the conference that will be free and open to the public, but Kaplan believes it is a ploy to sideline HIV-AIDS activists who are demanding greater accountability from their governments in the fight against AIDS.

"It is hailed as a set-up where the community can gather, when in reality the important conversations are happening inside," she said.

The 15 million-dollar conference will bring together world leaders, scientists, activists and people living with HIV-AIDS.

The media has erroneously reported that the Bush Administration will send "only" 50 representatives to the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand next month. The reality is that the U.S. government will send over 200 people to the conference (registration fee is \$1,250 per person). The Department of Health and Human Services announced in April that its will send 50 federal employees plus another 80 scientists, researchers, and AIDS workers. In a response to a letter from members of Congress, USAID-- another federal agency-- revealed this week that it will send an additional 74 people to the conference. HHS estimated that the agency would spend a half a million dollars on the conference (\$500,000) but USAID omitted the amount it is expected to spend on the conference.

June 28, 2004

The Honorable Mark Souder
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Souder:

Administrator Natsios has asked me to reply to your letter of May 5, 2004, concerning the XV International AIDS Conference to be held in Bangkok this July. Fighting the international HIV/AIDS pandemic is one of President Bush's highest national security priorities and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is committed to win that fight. The Bangkok conference is an important opportunity for the U.S. Government to promote the President's agenda.

I share many of your concerns in regards to the International AIDS Conference held in Barcelona in 2002. To that end, I have directed USAID to highlight the role of faith-based organizations in fighting and treating AIDS and to promote President Bush's balanced ABC--abstinence, be faithful and the correct and consistent use of condoms--approach to AIDS prevention. Dr. Anne Peterson, Assistant Administrator for Global Health, will be leading USAID's delegation to the conference and will be promoting these issues in numerous public events.

Specifically, USAID will provide majority funding for a large booth at Bangkok for over 150 faith-based organizations that might otherwise have been unable to participate in the conference. This booth, organized by Catholic Relief Services, will provide opportunities for faith-based organizations to share their experiences and expertise with other AIDS-fighting organizations.

In addition, USAID will sponsor a special satellite session of the conference on the ABC prevention model, featuring presentations from Dr. Edward Green of Harvard and other researchers who have shown the success of Uganda's emphasis on abstinence and be faithful messages. This satellite session is specifically designed to encourage other donors to promote the ABC model in their programming. USAID is also funding a number of poster presentations on this topic.

USAID is sponsoring a session to train 100 representatives of faith-based organizations on effective monitoring and evaluation of HIV/AIDS programs at a faith-based forum immediately prior to the conference.

In addition, many of USAID's partners will send representatives to the International AIDS Conference to make presentations on research and programs that were funded by USAID.

USAID's Office of HIV/AIDS hosted two major conferences last year, one on orphans and vulnerable children, and a second on how community and faith-based organizations can work with USAID. The cost of these conferences totaled approximately \$300,000. In addition, Dr. Peterson attended a number of meetings to promote the administration's HIV/AIDS programs, including conferences sponsored by the Christian Medical and Dental Association, Catholic Medical Mission Board and the American Public Health Association. She and other USAID staff have regularly attended conferences around the country organized by The White House for faith-based organizations.

A list of staff attending the conference from USAID's Washington Headquarters and from our Missions is enclosed. If we can be of further assistance, please do not hesitate to let us know.

Sincerely,
J. Edward Fox
Assistant Administrator
Bureau for Legislative and
Public Affairs

Enclosure

USAID Washington staff attending
XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok

Anne Peterson	Asst. Administrator, Global Health
Michael Miller	Deputy Asst. Administrator, Global Health
Les Munson	Chief of Staff, Global Health
Connie Carrino	Director, Office of HIV/AIDS
Gabrielle Bushman	Senior Advisor, HIV/AIDS Public Affairs
Clif Cortez	Senior Regional Advisor, Asia and Near East
Amanda Gibbons	Advisor, Mother-to-Child Transmission
Jason Heffner	HIV/AIDS Technical Advisor, Faith-Based Organizations
Linda Sussman	Senior Advisor, Orphans and Vulnerable Children
Cameron Wolf	Senior Technical Advisor, Monitoring and Evaluation
Jeff Grieco	Deputy Asst. Administrator, Legislative & Public Affairs
Peter Salama	Principal Advisor, HIV/AIDS, Africa
Billy Pick	Technical Advisor, HIV/AIDS, Asia and Near East
Stephen Lee	Advisor, HIV/AIDS/Infectious Diseases, Europe and Eurasia
Lindsay Stewart	Senior Advisor, HIV/AIDS, Latin America & the Caribbean
Sandra Jordan	Director of Communications and Development, Population
Lee Claypool	Biologist

Rose McCullough	Senior Technical Advisor
Harris Solomon	Biomedical Research Fellow
Russ Scarato	Health Economist
Bryn Sakagawa	Technical Advisor
Tony Boni	Pharmaceutical Management Advisor
Steve Hawkins	Senior Logistics Advisor
Jason Wright	Technical Advisor for Donor Coordination
Linda Shovlain	Senior Advisor, Office of Faith-Based Initiatives

USAID Mission Staff Attending
Bangkok International AIDS Conference

Africa

Eritrea	Semere Gebregiorgis
Kenya	Cheryl Sonnichsen John Wasonga
Malawi	Elise Jensen Alfred Chirwa
Mali	Isaka Niambele
Mozambique	Karen Shelley
Namibia	Lahya Shiimi

Regional Economic Development Support Office (Nairobi)
Jeff Ashley
Mary Pat Kieffer
Hallen Olvoch
Janet Hayman
Mary Inez-Lyons

Senegal Ramatoulaye Dioume

Zambia Kennedy Musonda
 Shanda Steimer

Asia and Near East

Bangladesh Sheri-Nouane Johnson

Cambodia David Hausner
 Chantha Chak
 Bunna Sok

India Meri Sinnitt

Indonesia Ratna Kurniawati

Japan Rie Yamaki

Nepal Sheila Lutjens
 Shanta Gurons
 Jesse Brandt
 Hari Raj Koirala

Philippines Carina Stover

Thailand Lois Bradshaw
 Michelle Russell
 Matt Friedman
 Patchara Rumakom
 Wannee Kunchornratana

Vietnam Daniel Levitt
 Ngo Tien Loi

Europe and Eurasia

Central Asia Republics Kerry Pelzman

Russia Bethanne Moskov

Ukraine Irina Gladun
Oleksander Cherkas

Latin America and the Caribbean

Brazil Michael Burkly
Jaime Rojas

Caribbean Rebecca Rohrer
Joan Atkinson

Dominican Republic David Losk
Maria Castillo

Guyana Julia Rehwinkel
Edris George

Jamaica Stephanie Smith
Margaret Sanchez

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

July 2, 2004

HHS cuts group for AIDS forum

By Joyce Howard Price

A total of 60 scientists from the Department of Health and Human Services will be attending the 15th International AIDS Conference this month in Bangkok, about a quarter of the number who attended the last conference in Spain two years ago.

The reduced presence of Americans at the July 11-16 conference has prompted criticism by some members of Congress and by AIDS activists.

But a spokesman for HHS Tommy G. Thompson defended the change, noting that the government spent \$3.6 million to send 236 persons to the AIDS conference in Barcelona in 2002.

The spokesman, William Pierce, said department officials concluded, "This was not the best use of resources in fighting diseases. We felt we could use our resources better."

He noted that "millions of dollars of taxpayers' money" have been spent to send hundreds of HHS employees to various conferences around the world. Mr. Pierce said because of concerns about the appropriateness of such expenditures, HHS formalized a new policy last summer that affects attendance at all international conferences.

"The policy says that any time any one agency sends 20 people [to a conference], we'd like to review it," the HHS spokesman said. "The bottom line is what is the best use of taxpayers' money?"

Mr. Pierce said it will cost about \$250,000 to send 50 HHS employees to Thailand.

Another 10, he said, will be going from posts in Asia.

In addition, he said, the government will spend another \$250,000 to sponsor conference attendance for 80 representatives of countries in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean that receive emergency U.S. help in fighting the AIDS epidemic. The U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) will also send 74 representatives.

Some Democrats in Congress denounced the new policy after reports that 28 researchers from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were

forced to cancel presentations at the Bangkok AIDS conference as a result of the attendance cutbacks.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman of California, ranking Democrat on the House Committee on Government Reform, and Rep. Louise M. Slaughter, New York Democrat, sent a letter to Mr. Thompson, criticizing the move and asking him to reconsider.

"We are writing to protest your decision to stop over two dozen U.S. scientists from presenting peer-reviewed studies and leading research seminars for international colleagues at this summer's International AIDS Conference," the House members said in their letter dated June 24. "By grounding these experts, you are keeping them from learning from their peers around the world, and you are depriving the world of scientific leadership by the United States."

Mr. Pierce said the CDC had known since last year it could send only 20 representatives to the AIDS conference and had overbooked in violation of the new travel restrictions established for HHS employees.

The information these scientists would have presented in person in Bangkok could be presented via teleconferences, he said. "With all the modern technology available, there's not a great need to actually be somewhere," said Mr. Pierce.

Mr. Pierce characterized the objections raised by House Democrats as "more about politics than any kind of genuine concern."

In a related development, a study of more than 1,000 Tanzanian women -- pregnant and infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS -- found that daily doses of multivitamins appear to slow down the disease and cut in half the risk of getting full-blown AIDS.

The research, led by scientists at the Harvard School of Public Health and published in the New England Journal of Medicine, found that malnourished women who took a combination of vitamins B,C, and E maintained a higher level of immune cells that allowed them to fight HIV. After six years, 25 percent of women on the multivitamins developed AIDS or died, compared with 31 percent of those who took placebos.

Associated Press

July 2, 2004 Friday 9:16 AM Eastern Time

Bangkok AIDS Meeting to Feature Drag Show

BANGKOK, Thailand --- [Brazilian dresses made of condoms, a drag show from Indonesia and a special appearance by actor Richard Gere.](#)

These and dozens of other cultural performances, art shows, fashion parades and films from around the world will be featured at the international AIDS conference this month in Bangkok to break the monotony of scientific sessions, organizers said Friday.

Nearly 240 artists, mostly from Asia but also from Africa, the Americas and Europe, will produce more than 70 shows during the 15th International AIDS Conference July 11-17, said Chumpon Apisuk, the chief coordinator of the cultural program.

"We would like to energize the conference with art and culture, to bring color, to bring it alive," Chumpon said. More than half of the performing artists are people living with HIV/AIDS, he said.

The program includes painting and photography exhibitions, a festival of films and documentaries on AIDS, music, modern and traditional dance, poetry, story telling, puppets and fashion shows including one by models infected with HIV.

"We want to show they are human beings. They are normal just like us," said Chumpon, whose group Silabha is organizing the shows.

The display of culture will not only be in the corridors and exhibition halls of the conference venue but also on the streets of Bangkok, and at the main railway station where Thailand's top dress designers will sell their clothes at up to 70 percent discount with the proceeds going to AIDS charity.

The best known Thai hair dressers will give hair cuts for 30 baht (U.S. cents 80), said Chumpon.

A highlight of the six-day cultural extravaganza is Brazilian Adriana Bertini's condom dresses. Bertini believes her art can provoke reflections on sexual health matters, according to an organizer statement.

Gaya Nusantara will perform a traditional Indonesian dance show in drag while Gere, the Hollywood star, will make a special appearance at the opening of a dance performance by Silabha artists.

Chumpon said it will be the biggest cultural show ever put on by an international AIDS conference.

The Nation (Thailand)
July 2, 2004, Friday

XV INTERNATIONAL AIDS CONFERENCE: Arts, culture have central place on agenda

As scientists debate the latest HIV/Aids treatments, a poet might be heard among the audience. Outside the meeting rooms, paintings, performances and photo exhibitions line the hallways leading to the Global Village area and the booths of non-governmental organisations, where all kinds of cultural events from all continents are staged.

Somewhere along these hallways, don't be surprised if you encounter a condom-like flying object, the brainchild of American artist Myk Henry, which gives away free condoms.

Not to be missed is a fashion show featuring Brazilian designer Adriana Bertini's latest latex designs. Her dresses made of condoms are internationally famous.

Janelle Fawkes and Queer Choke's Debby Project from Australia will keep people wondering about the work and life of Australian sex workers. Their local counterparts, the Honey Bee Street Theatre, will also perform short skits promoting condom use as well as imitating sex shows common at many of Patpong's bars. Meanwhile, their Canadian colleagues will install a monument made of beads at Sukhumvit's Soi Cowboy.

These exhibitions of art, street music, modern and traditional dance, film, poetry, magic and games, local story-telling, puppetry, paintings, photography, fashion and more are part of the Silabha Art and Cultural Programme held in conjunction with the conference.

The programme will bring a cultural richness and dynamism to the conventionally science-oriented conference, bringing issues that affect us all out into the open and helping to build a greater understanding about HIV/Aids, said Chantawipa Apisuk, who is involved with the cultural programmes and events.

The Art and Cultural Programme will feature top artists, performers, films and talent from Australia, Canada, Cambodia, China, France, Ghana, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Kenya, Nepal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda, the UK, Ukraine, the US, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

From Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Uganda, Zambia and South Africa there will be posters, puppetry, performance, songs, photo exhibitions and poetry.

Among the highlights of the cultural festival is the Africasia programme, produced with the support of the Rockefeller Foundation. This is an exchange programme between communities of African and Asian people sharing and exchanging the traditional wisdom and contemporary culture they use to fight the Aids epidemic.

Thai and Kenyan children will sing together at the opening of the conference. The programme will also include a three- to four-hour workshop for Thai and African artists and performers, as well as a series of performances.

Many Asian artists have also prepared cultural programmes. What would happen if the deities were also infected with HIV/Aids? Find the answer in a shadow-puppet performance by the Sovanna Phum Khmer Art Association.

Indian Roxanne Nadeau will share her poems about the stigma and discrimination facing sex workers and drug users in their day-to-day struggle to get condoms and needles.

On July 9, Hua Lamphong railway station will become a catwalk for fashion shows by leading designers and top models. The latest fashion lines from over 10 top brands will also be sold at drastically reduced prices, according to organisers.

As part of the cultural programme, the Aids Film Festival will feature more than 10 films on HIV/Aids from July 10-17. US actor and Aids activist Richard Gere will share some thoughts with guests at the festival's opening on July 12 at the Scala theatre, to be followed by the Asian premiere of 'A Closer Walk', directed by Academy Award-nominated director Robert Bilheimer.

The major venues of the cultural programme and the Aids Film Festival will be the Global Village area of the Impact Convention and Exhibition Centre, the Goethe Institut, the Scala and Lido theatres, Hua Lamphong train station, the Queen's Gallery on Rajdamnoen Avenue, and the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand.

For more information on the Silabha Art and Cultural Programme contact:
cultural2004@aidsthai.org <<mailto:cultural2004@aidsthai.org>>. Tel (02) 653 0677 or fax (02) 653 0676.

NATURE MEDICINE
VOLUME 10 | NUMBER 7
JULY 2004
PAGE 657

Scientists rip US for cutbacks to global AIDS summit

In a move that has angered AIDS researchers worldwide, the US government has slashed its contribution to the 15th International AIDS Conference, to be held in July in Bangkok.

The US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has limited the number of its employees at the conference to 50, down from 236 at the last meeting in Barcelona in 2002.

The measure primarily affects researchers at the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many of whom had already had abstracts peer reviewed and accepted. Attendees from other agencies and universities and HHS employees in Asia are not affected.

As of early June, more than 50 presentations from US government researchers have been canceled. Direct financial support from the US, previously the meeting's biggest contributor, has been cut to \$250,000 from \$1.1 million in 2002.

The European Union, Canada, Sweden and Thailand all contributed more than that amount, says conference director Mats Ahnlund.

The Bangkok conference is not the only one to have lost US government support. At the Global Health Council meeting in June, the organization's president Nils Daulaire blasted the HHS and other US agencies for cutting funds after "a small clique of right-wing extremists" objected to participants who don't oppose abortion. HHS spokesman Bill Pierce says the travel restrictions stem from a new policy, decided last year. In order to spend tax dollars in a more "responsible way," the HHS now limits to 40 the number of employees who can travel to any conference abroad, he says, but the Bangkok contingent was extended to 50 because of the meeting's exceptional scale.

The decision to cut attendees was first relayed to NIH personnel in an e-mail dated 9 February, but made no mention of other international

AIDS conferences, including an April meeting in Whistler, Canada. That meeting's list of attendees includes the names of 107 HHS employees.

But many AIDS researchers, including conference co-chair Joep Lange, say they doubt the cuts are driven by budget considerations.

Instead, says Lange, president of the International AIDS Society, "religious fanatics" within the US administration are to blame.

Lange says it is "inconceivable" that a country spending \$15 billion on fighting AIDS would limit travel because of financial constraints. He adds that he has received no reply to a 3 May letter to HHS secretary Tommy Thompson, in which the society and the Thai government offered financial assistance to HHS researchers.

The administration may have been irked when they failed to land prominent spots for faith-based approaches in the meeting program, Lange suggests. For instance, he says, officials had suggested that the organizers invite Franklin Graham, son and successor of evangelist Billy Graham, as a keynote speaker—an idea Lange says he respectfully declined. "I did not think this speaker would have been representative for religions worldwide," he says.

Some in the administration are still upset over activists' heckling of Thompson in 2002. In an open letter to Lange in May, five Republican members of the House of Representatives complained about Thompson's "rude reception" in Barcelona and about "a seeming bias against the scientifically proven success of programs that promote [sexual] abstinence and faithfulness."

Pierce says suspicions that the administration's motives were political are off the mark. It is perfectly normal for the US government, as a principal conference sponsor, to suggest speakers, he adds. "Ultimately it's up to the organizers whom to invite," he says. "There is no policy of consequence."

Whatever the real reasons, the commotion over US attendance "has tainted the conference's overall message of cooperation and solidarity," says Mario Stevenson, a molecular biologist at the University of Massachusetts. "HHS may indeed be shifting money from travel to research—in principle, I'm all for that," he says. "I just hope that was their motive." ---- Peter Vermij, Amsterdam

XINHUA NEWS AGENCY

November 28, 2003, Friday

Thai student leaders against condom-vending machine on campus

BANGKOK, Nov. 28 (Xinhua) -- **Student leaders from Thailand's high-education institutions have expressed opposition to the installment of condom-vending machines on campus, fearing it would encourage more sex activities among young students.**

"We agreed that the timing is not right and that (the condom- vending machine plan) is not the best solution to fight the AIDS problem," the Student Union Network secretary-general Vitoon Chomchaipol was quoted by newspaper The Nation as saying on Thursday.

All but one of the seven board members attending Thursday's meeting voted against the Public Health Ministry's plan to install condom-vending machines on campus next year.

Having successfully encouraged 98 percent of the sex industry to use condoms, the Thai government was now concerned with youth having active sex life.

Only one third of young unmarried couples who had casual sex were thought to use condom, said the ministry earlier.

Vowing to campaign for 100 percent use of condoms among young people, the public health ministry recently installed 3,000 condom- vending machines in toilets of department stores, entertainment venues and other public areas to promote safe sex.

"Casual sex is a problem involving a small group of students," said Vitoon. "We are concerned that with easy access to condoms, the majority, who are reluctant now, will jump onto the bandwagon. "

Beating down annual HIV/AIDS infection cases from 140,000 of the 1991 to current 20,000 cases a year, Thailand now was faced with challenges of increasing prevalence among youths having active sex life, experts warned.

XINHUA NEWS AGENCY

November 27, 2003, Thursday

Poll shows opposition to condom machines in schools

BANGKOK, Nov. 27 (Xinhua) -- **The majority of students, teachers and members of the public are opposed to an idea of putting condom machines in schools, according to a poll published Thursday.**

However, the Suan Dusit Poll of 1,042 students, teachers and members of the public found that over 90 percent of each group believed condoms to be essential to reduce the spread of AIDS, while 95 percent of teachers, 78 percent of students and 89 percent of the general public felt that young people were a particularly high risk group.

But 81 percent of teachers, 54 percent of students, and 62 percent of the general public, nonetheless, expressed disagreement to the idea of putting condom machines in educational institutions, saying that it would promote sexual relationships among young people, rather than acting as a preventative measure.

Asked how the risk of AIDS could be reduced among young people, respondents cited education on safe sexual practices, more discussions among family members about sex, and the promotion of Thai cultural values on sexual relations.

It was reported that, by the end October this year, there were 309,514 AIDS carrier in Thailand and 70,786 persons died of the disease.