

WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY
56th session

Geneva, 19-28 May 2003

Committee A
Agenda item 14.4
“WHO’s contribution to the follow-up of the
United Nations General Assembly session on HIV/AIDS”

Statement by

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INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION
OF RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT SOCIETIES

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**Statement by
the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
at the 56th World Health Assembly
Committee A, agenda item 14.4
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**Progress made in the International Federation's AIDS response
since the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS (June 2001)**

No organization can defeat AIDS on its own; governments cannot do it all themselves. The UNGASS on HIV/AIDS calls on all parties to collaborate. An excellent opportunity for local collaboration is the Country Co-ordinating Mechanism of the GFATM, but the major constraint for Red Cross is that far too many Health Ministries are still systematically shutting out civil society participation.

The 2001 United Nations General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS acknowledged the efforts of RCRC volunteers. Red Cross Red Crescent National Societies are increasingly ready for collaboration and where this has been accepted and nurtured, our volunteers are an indispensable part of successful local responses to HIV/AIDS.

Since the UNGASS meeting a major effort from the International Federation to live up to the responsibility of being the world's largest humanitarian organization has occurred. In just a few years we have scaled up from a programme of US\$3 million per year to over US\$30 million last year, with further scale up already planned for the next 3 years.

Many Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers who live in the hardest hit countries and communities are HIV positive themselves. They are breaking the stigma that surrounds the epidemic, triggering courageous community responses where families can take measures to prevent the further spread of the infection, support those that are already infected, and protect orphans and other vulnerable children.

As a contribution towards the UNGASS objective to eliminate stigma and discrimination, the International Federation started campaigning on World Red Cross Day one year ago on the theme **The truth about AIDS. Pass it on** in collaboration with the Global Network of People living with HIV/AIDS (GNP+), UNAIDS and Saatchi & Saatchi. The International Federation is now a UNAIDS Collaborating Centre for this work.

RCRC Societies participating in the campaign have experienced how associating with people living with HIV/AIDS and other vulnerable groups has meant attracting stigma to themselves, but many are rising to this challenge in ways that honour and update the legacy we have inherited.

HIV/AIDS is highlighting the widespread inhumane treatment of injecting drug users. In many places people needing treatment are forced to the margins by government policies which also create situations where transmission of HIV is more likely. Social evils policies, condemnation, harassment, incarceration, and even killing of drugs users does not work. The scientific evidence is clear: harm reduction works. Needle and syringe exchange, drug substitution, and condoms are vital components of the HIV/AIDS response, and government co-operation with RCRC, including necessary legal reform is urgently needed to enable these life saving measures to be used, and to build the social cohesion necessary to stop AIDS.