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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Asian AIDS NGOs Face Restrictions

(New York, November 25, 2009)—Despite pledges by world leaders and the UN to support civil society, AIDS nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) face heavy restrictions in Cambodia, China, Myanmar and Vietnam, Asia Catalyst said in a report released for World AIDS Day.

“Heads of state have learned to pay lip service to the role of NGOs in order to gain international support, but the reality on the ground can be quite different,” said Sara Davis, executive director of Asia Catalyst. “Restricting civil society has slowed Asia’s response to the AIDS crisis.”

The report details restrictions on NGO registration, censorship, harassment and imprisonment of AIDS activists in the four countries. Asia Catalyst also noted that three AIDS activists – Hu Jia (China), Than Naing (Myanmar) and Wengdue (China/Tibet) -- are in prison, and called for their immediate release.

“AIDS activists face a range of obstacles to their work,” Davis said. “In some dramatic cases, this can mean imprisonment, disruption of meetings of former drug users in order to impose compulsory urine tests, or forced eviction of harm reduction groups from their offices. But more often, and just as disastrously, it’s a case of miring local groups in bureaucratic tangles that make it impossible to do their work.”

The report noted positive developments as well. Despite restrictions, local groups have continued to test the limits in all four countries.

“In Laos, new regulations will permit NGOs to register for the first time this year,” Davis said.

Asia Catalyst called on all countries to lift burdensome restrictions on NGO registration and operation, and to consult with local NGOs on policy and law.

Asia Catalyst is a New York-based nonprofit that partners with civil society advocates in Asia to inspire, create and launch innovative, self-sustaining programs and organizations that advance human rights, social justice, and environmental protection. *Restrictions on AIDS NGOs in Asia* is available for free download at www.asiacatalyst.org.