



*For immediate release:*

## **International AIDS Groups Urge UN to Speak Out Against State Harassment of AIDS Activists**

(Bali, Indonesia -- August 4, 2009) -- UNAIDS must speak out against government restrictions on AIDS NGOs in Asia, Asia Catalyst said today at the International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP). Over thirty international AIDS organizations, including Physicians for Human Rights and the Coalition of Police for Harm Reduction, signed a letter calling on UNAIDS to take a stronger stand on the rights of frontline AIDS organizations.

“UNAIDS and international donors have kept quiet in public while our colleagues are imprisoned, threatened and beaten,” the letter says.

Asia Catalyst said that a Chinese AIDS advocate who was invited by UNAIDS to participate in ICAAP had his passport seized by police. Police warned the activist that if the activist speaks to international organizations and media, that person will “face the same fate as Hu Jia.” (Chinese AIDS activist Hu Jia is currently serving a three-and-a-half year prison sentence for “inciting state subversion”.)

In recent days, China has cracked down on other NGOs, raiding the office of Yirenping, a legal aid center for people with hepatitis B, and jailing the director and finance administrator of civil rights group Open Constitution Initiative.

Harm reduction outreach workers in Southeast Asia also face the risk of detention. Malaysian group PT Foundation reports that harm reduction workers in Malaysia are frequently interrogated by police. Cambodian group Korsang, which provides shelter and treatment to drug users, has been forcibly evicted by police six times in the past five years. In many countries, frontline AIDS organizations face restrictions on registration, as well as government censorship of AIDS-related websites and publications.

The letter calls on UNAIDS director Michel Sidibe to “issue a strong public statement urging governments to lift restrictions on AIDS NGOs and to stop jailing our colleagues in Asia.” The 33 signers to the letter include AIDS NGOs and academics from Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.

Asia Catalyst will host a satellite session at ICAAP with signers of the letter. “Restrictions on AIDS NGOs in Asia” will include speakers Anand Grover (UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health), Holly Bradford (Korsang, Cambodia), Li Dan (Dongzhen, China) and Raymond Tai (PT Foundation, Malaysia). The session will aim to

---

analyze the widespread problem of restrictions/harassment of AIDS NGOs in Asia, and brainstorm solutions. It will take place Monday, August 10 from 17:45-19:15 in the BICC-Westin.

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. The text of the letter with list of signers follows, and is available at [www.asiacatalyst.org](http://www.asiacatalyst.org).

\* \* \*

## **LETTER TO UNAIDS FROM INTERNATIONAL AIDS ORGANIZATIONS**

Mr. Michel Sidibe  
Executive Director, UNAIDS  
Under Secretary-General of the United Nations  
Avenue Appia 20  
1211 Geneva, Switzerland

August 4, 2009

Dear Mr. Sidibe:

We are writing as concerned AIDS professionals to urge UNAIDS to address the continuing restrictions on frontline AIDS nonprofit organizations in Asia. While governments state their support for the work of NGOs in fighting AIDS, many colleagues on the ground face surveillance and intimidation. In too many countries, police detain harm reduction workers, jail AIDS activists; shut down websites and the offices of grassroots AIDS organizations. UNAIDS and international donors such as the Global Fund have kept quiet in public while our colleagues are imprisoned, threatened and beaten.

We need UNAIDS to issue a strong public statement about the need for governments to lift restrictions on AIDS NGOs and to stop jailing our colleagues in Asia.

- In July 2009, a Chinese AIDS advocate and person living with HIV/AIDS who was invited by UNAIDS to the International Conference on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) in Bali was prevented by police from traveling to the meeting, and warned that if he speaks to international organizations and media about his experience and allows them to use his name, he will “face the same fate as [jailed AIDS advocate] Hu Jia.”
- In July 2009, Yirenping, a Chinese legal aid center for people with hepatitis B,

- 
- was raided by government officials for publishing legal aid handbooks without permission.
- In February 2009, the Malaysian AIDS Commission reported that harm reduction workers offering clean syringes are rounded up by police and RELA (the people's volunteer corps). PT Foundation reports that harm reduction workers are often interrogated by police.
  - In June 2008, a harm reduction outreach worker with the Cambodian NGO Korsang was arrested by police and detained for five days without charges. Korsang has been frequently evicted from its facilities by the police.

These are examples from the past year, but these kinds of incidents are all too common – not just in Asia, but internationally.

As you know, NGOs do essential work with the marginalized groups who are most vulnerable to the AIDS epidemic—children, women, men who have sex with men, drug users, sex workers, and ethnic minorities. Internationally, we know that outspoken AIDS advocates, especially those living with HIV, are responsible for much of the progress made in the fight against the epidemic since the 1980s.

States are bound by international human rights law to respect and protect the rights of all persons to freedom of association and freedom of expression, and numerous UN policies call on states to ensure free expression and community consultation as part of AIDS policy design.

Up to now, the international community has reacted to this pattern of arrests and detentions as if they were local problems, instead of addressing the problem proactively. Country offices of UNAIDS have been reluctant to speak out about individual cases for fear of jeopardizing access to government officials. But this is an issue that is not disappearing – government officials who repress NGOs are only emboldened by our silence.

We urge you to:

- Issue a strong public statement calling on all governments to reform policies that arbitrarily limit the registration and operation of AIDS NGOs;
- Raise these issues publicly in your country visits, so that AIDS activists know and hear of your support for their work;
- Meet in person with AIDS activists who are consistently harassed by police and the government during your country visits, to signal your support of their work;
- Press all countries, publicly and privately, to end the pattern of arrests and detention of AIDS and harm reduction workers; and

- 
- Instruct country offices of UNAIDS to speak out, loudly and clearly, when AIDS activists are imprisoned and harassed by police.

A strong UN voice is essential to the survival of our colleagues in the field, and only a robust and free civil society will help Asia to win the war against HIV/AIDS.

Sincerely,

Sara L.M. Davis, Ph.D.  
Executive Director  
**Asia Catalyst**

Mae Fe G. Ancheta-Templa, RSW, MSW  
Managing Director  
Secretary, Board of Trustees  
**Kyabaan Association, Inc (KAI since 1994)**

Mabel Bianco  
**Strategies from the South - International**

Holly Bradford  
Executive Director  
**Korsang**

Michaela Clayton  
Director  
**AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa**

Ton Coenen  
Executive Director  
Irene Keizer  
Program Manager  
**AIDS Fonds**

Jerome A. Cohen  
Co-Director  
**New York University US-Asia Law Institute**

Greg Denham  
Convener  
**Coalition of Police Supporting Harm Reduction**

---

Richard Elliott  
Executive Director  
**Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network**

Hu Jing

Hu Ruichen

Andrew Hunter  
**Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers**

Karyn Kaplan  
**Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group (TTAG)**

Charles King  
Executive Director  
**Housing Works**

Adama Kompaore  
Secrétaire Afrique de l'ouest du Forum francophone de lutte contre la TB/VIH (FFTb)  
Chargé de programme TB et VIH, Formateur  
**Association African Solidarité**

Katie Krauss  
Executive Director  
**AIDS Policy Project**

**Latin America and Caribbean Council of AIDS Service NGOs**

Todd Lester  
Executive Director  
**freeDimensional**

Li Dan, Director  
Xu Haibo, Project Manager  
Shen Tingting, Communication Officer  
**Dongjen Center for Human Rights Education and Action**

Edward Low  
Director  
**Positive Malaysian Treatment Access & Advocacy Group (MTAAG+)**

Damien Lu, Ph.D.  
President  
**Information Clearinghouse for Chinese Gays and Lesbians**

---

Royston Martin  
**World AIDS Campaign**

Andrew J. Nathan, Ph.D.  
Class of 1919 Professor of Political Science  
**Columbia University**

Alessandra Nilo  
**Gestos -- HIV+, Communication and Gender**

**Physicians for Human Rights**

Asia Russell  
Director, International Policy  
**Health GAP (Global Access Project)**

A.Sankar  
Executive Director  
**EMPOWER**

Raymond Tai  
Acting Executive Director  
Fatimah Bte Abdullah  
Sex Workers Program  
**PT Foundation**

Tian Xi  
**Set Everyone Free**

Wan Yanhai  
Director  
**Beijing Aizhixing Institute**

Elisabeth Wickeri  
Leitner Center for International Law and Justice  
**Fordham University**

Loretta Wong  
Executive Director  
**AIDS Concern**

Leo Yiu  
Chief Executive  
**Hong Kong Midnight Blue**

---