Access for all

Women account for nearly half of adult patients as they are increasingly more at risk and acquire HIV five to ten years earlier than men. The International AIDS Conference which was held in Thailand recently discussed the primary risks for becoming HIV infected, writes Huma Khawar.

After a week of controversial debates about a variety of HIV/AIDS related issues the XV International AIDS Conference ended in Thailand recently. Along with promises, hopes and encouragement, there was a lot of talk about aspirations, vision and goals.

The AIDS epidemic in Southeast Asia was discovered in the mid-1980s when the first cases of HIV were detected. HIV began to spread rapidly a few years later, showing high prevalence rates among cohorts of injecting drug users and female sex workers by the late 1980s. The disease followed a common route, with the clients of female sex workers transmitting the virus to other sexual partners, and a wave of prenatal transmissions following.

Thailand, a country of 65 million people, has an estimated adult HIV prevalence rate of 1.5 per cent, with an estimated 460,000 AIDS-related deaths since the beginning of the epidemic. The Thai government acted quickly and decisively, launching large-scale HIV prevention initiatives along with civil society. The best known component, a massive prevention effort, was their “100 per cent condom programme,” implemented nationwide in 1992. The campaign brought about a major increase in its use among clients of sex workers and ever since there has been a remarkable decline in new infections.

This was the first ever opportunity for any South Asian country to act as conference host. The city of Bangkok had more than 17,000 delegates from 160 countries attending the conference.

The opening ceremony was attended by world renowned scientists, political leaders, youth, communities, non governmental organizations, people living with HIV/AIDS, religious, intellectuals and people from media arts and entertainment industry. Jennifer Hawkins, Miss Universe 2004, participated in the candlelit Memorial Ceremony along with the Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra. “I will never cease my commitment to universal access to anti-retroviral drugs for people living with HIV/AIDS,” said the Thai prime minister.

The 20-year-old Miss Universe plans to use her title to advocate HIV/AIDS prevention particularly among adolescents.

Two issues that emerged during the opening ceremony were: 1) access for all and 2) the importance of a gender focus. In a moving
address Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, said that the number of women affected with HIV was increasing. He added that all countries needed to empower women to develop the ability and confidence to negotiate sexual practices safely and also stressed the importance of challenging men’s behaviour and attitudes.

In different sessions spread over the entire week, delegates questioned the success of medical treatment in improving the quality of life of people living with HIV and focused on a fresh commitment to address the social and cultural factors that contribute towards HIV. Africans came to Thailand with the strong message that “Asia can avoid the mistakes made in Africa in the last 20 years of the AIDS experience.” Stigma and discrimination featured in other ceremony presentations and speakers described the importance of holding, hugging or kissing a person infected with HIV.

Prevention is still a priority in the global crusade against the AIDS epidemic. The delegates debated alternative approaches to prevention policies and programmes. Abstaining from sexual activity, mutual monogamy and condom use are the three key behaviours that can prevent or reduce the likelihood of sexual transmission of AIDS virus. In sessions devoted to prevention technologies, the development of microbicides, vaccine trials and the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV, speakers presented successes and expectations for the future.

Women now account for nearly half of all adult infections as they are increasingly more at risk and acquire HIV five to ten years earlier than men. There was a lot of talk on the need for HIV prevention methods which place control over their use in the hands of women. Noting that the primary risks for becoming HIV infected included being “poor, young and married.”

Dr Nafs Sadiq, special envoy of the UN Secretary-General for HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, spoke at the session for leaders responding to HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific. Many issues are being highlighted, particularly the vulnerability of girls in South Asia. “In Asia, women are becoming infected basically because they are not in control of their partners’ behaviour, because young people are more active and because many homosexual men are married.” Answering to the question
whether her country's leadership realized the seriousness of the issue, she said, "There is a commitment at all levels, and President Musharraf and the Prime Minister have come out publicly about the issue."

Marina Mahathir, President of the Malaysian AIDS Council, said, "We talk about AIDS every day, and we think it is obvious to the rest of the world, but in fact it's not. Every day we talk about AIDS in Asia, but out there it's invisible and people don't think that it's there. Within that invisibility, a particular concern is that women might be more invisible."

The programme made its debut in Bangkok with just one problem, a squirming a little when asked if he would give his movie royalties to the fight against AIDS: "I don't have more money to give because I have given most of it." Richard Gere who spent the entire week in Bangkok, to the delegates' delight, attended various sessions and spoke about his work in India and how they cope with local television stations to push awareness of HIV/AIDS issues. The conference was an emotional time for him and brought back memories of friends in the entertainment business who had died of AIDS in the '80s. "I am here today because there is a vicious terrorist out there - and it's not Osama Bin Laden. It's AIDS!" he said.

The huge figure of the conference despite the fact that I am an old age pensioner, with no power and even less influence. As you all know I have announced my retirement from public life, which means that I should not be here today. However, the fight against AIDS is one of the greatest challenges that the world faces at the start of the 21st century. I cannot rest until I am certain that the global response is sufficient to turn the tide of the epidemic."

Sonia Gandhi spoke about India's efforts in tackling the issue. "While I do agree there is no room for complacency, I would like to take this opportunity to ascertain the determination and ability of the government and the people of India to meet this"

Jennifer Hawkins, Miss Universe 2004 (left); Richard Gere, American actor (right)

shortage of patrons. Sessions moderated by CNN reporter, Riz Khan and Bill Roedy, President of MTV International Networks gave audiences opportunities to hold those leaders present accountable. Besides Nelson Mandela, leaders at the conference included Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Princess Mabel of Orange Nassau, South Africa.

According to Prafal Patel, the World Bank's Vice President for South Asia, leadership messages is now the most important issue in South Asia. "Low prevalence rate is one of the reasons the leadership is not showing the desired interest. Once we show them the figures of Africa, they will understand the urgency of the situation."

Hollywood star, Richard Gere budget, around US $17 million dollars did not include a number of independent expenses incurred by the local hosts, the Thai Ministry of Public Health. There was a lot of criticism for achieving the theme of the conference, "Access for All" as people thought that a thousand US dollars registration fee indicated "there is not enough access."

At the closing ceremony, a frail and feeble Nelson Mandela received standing ovation when he stepped on the stage to close the 15th International Aids Conference. The South African statesman vowed not to rest until he is certain the global response is sufficient to turn the tide of HIV/AIDS, which killed 2.9 million people last year. "I have reached a level of seniority which entitled me to participate in closing ceremonies daunting challenge," she said. Ms Gandhi who was the keynote speaker at the closing failed to make an impact at the conference. Firstly because rather than being as a South Asian leader, her speech was all about boosting India and what India has done in the fight against AIDS. Secondly, she came after Nelson Mandela, who received an unprecedented standing ovation and applause.

Through each of the presentations, discussions of success and failure reminded those present they were a long way from winning the battle. While much attention during the conference was devoted to scaling-up treatment, speakers reiterated the need to focus access to up-to-date, accurate information on how to prevent infections.