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We can eliminate HIV/AIDS among children by 2015: WHO

New Delhi, 1 December 2010: Although new HIV infections show a downward trend in countries of the World Health Organization's South-East Asia Region, particularly India, Thailand, Nepal and Myanmar, HIV/AIDS is still a serious public health problem. Perhaps the most vulnerable group are children with HIV/AIDS, whose numbers have increased by 46% between 2001 and 2009. Elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV by 2015 is possible and WHO is committed to this goal.

"The threat of HIV/AIDS to children highlights the need to strengthen health systems at the primary health care level and to integrate HIV-specific interventions within broader maternal and child health services," said Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia.

Globally, an estimated 33.3 million people live with the virus, and 2.6 million were newly infected in 2009. In the WHO South-East Asia Region, 3.5 million people are living with HIV/AIDS, largely in India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal and Thailand. In 2009, there were an estimated 220 000 new HIV infections in the Region and 230 000 people died of AIDS related illnesses. The populations at highest risk for HIV include (female sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender populations and people who inject drugs). Issues of health-care access, of stigma and ignorance, and the imperative to prevent transmission of HIV to a new generation are central to the response to HIV/AIDS. Regionally, women constitute 37% of the 3.5 million people living with HIV/AIDS, and without any intervention, about a third of infants born to HIV-positive mothers could acquire HIV. The virus can be transmitted to an infant during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding. However, only one in three HIV-positive women currently access prophylactic anti-retroviral treatment (ART) in the South-East Asia Region.

Widespread implementation of WHO's new guidelines on the use of antiretroviral drugs for treating pregnant women and preventing HIV infection in infants could substantially reduce pediatric HIV and improve maternal and child survival. Thailand is the first country in the Region to achieve universal coverage of effective interventions and has virtually eliminated pediatric HIV/AIDS. In India, WHO is providing technical support to the National AIDS Control Programme to adopt and implement new guidelines.

In addition, greater sensitivity to the status of those living with HIV/AIDS, fighting prejudice and stigma and mainstreaming HIV/AIDS services are critical to defeating the disease. WHO is advocating for action to reduce stigma and discrimination in health care settings and communities so that vulnerable and high-risk populations can access health-care services without prejudice and fear. It is important for an individual to know of his or her HIV status and seek treatment accordingly, as early management is the key to lengthening the lives of those living with HIV. Earlier treatment combined with availability and access to services will enable more people to undergo HIV testing and counselling and live longer.

On World AIDS Day, WHO calls on Member States to focus on strengthening health systems and ensuring early detection, care and treatment of HIV-affected persons in order to further progress in battling the disease. Particular effort should be made toward the goal of elimination of mother-to-child transmission of HIV by 2015.

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