

April 20, 2008

UPDATE ON THE WAR ON THAI DRUG USERS

ON APRIL 2, 2008, the Prime Minister of Thailand, Samak Sundaravej, announced that the police would have special powers to track down drug users in order to reduce the demand for drugs. This same policy was enacted in 2003. Police and security forces murdered over 2500 Thai citizens in the course of a few months. The police also committed thousands of other well documented human rights violations. Suspected drug users were beaten, tortured and forced to give false confessions about crimes they did not commit. Many were repeatedly and systematically denied access to medical care, including HIV medications.

Some government officials and even members of civil society are choosing a wait and see approach. Now is the time to act if we are to prevent the senseless murder of thousands of Thai people living with HIV/AIDS.

Multiple, anecdotal reports of violations, have arisen. They include:

- * The Thai-Lahu Foundation reports that 7 Lahu injection drug users, that they helped receive ARV treatment, are now afraid to go to the government clinic. Consequently their treatments are now halted.
- * An Australian broadcast showed police on Khao San Road in Bangkok testing Thai, but not western tourists, for drugs.
- * A Thai paper reported several people in Krabi province (South) were killed after being questioned by the police about drugs.
- * In Chiang Rai, several suspected drug dealers had their assets seized-without a trial to prove their guilt.
- * In Chiang Mai, there is an allegation of the torture and illegal detainment of a suspected drug dealer.
- * NGOs throughout the country report difficulties of supporting drug users in receiving HIV treatment and drug treatment since this announcement.

"The Thai war on drugs will have disastrous consequences for the fight against AIDS in Thailand. And it will not work as a response to drug use in Thai society," said Kriengkrai Aiemprasert, outreach worker at Ban Mit Sampan Harm Reduction Center in Bangkok. "The Thai Prime Minister should end the war on drugs, and promote a response to drug use based on evidence and human rights."

An estimated 50% of drug users in Thailand are HIV positive. HIV incidence and prevalence in Thailand has declined overall, except among people who use drugs. Experts attribute this to the Thai government's resistance to comprehensive harm reduction policy and programming, along with their reluctance to include drug users in treatment and prevention programs. "Fighting HIV in Thailand requires evidence-based interventions for people who use drugs," said Paisan Suwannawong, director of the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group (TTAG) and a former intravenous drug user. "We urgently need an effective response – instead the government has pledged to crack down on drugs and told us that we should expect more murders. The Prime Minister himself said killings are 'impossible to avoid' in a drug war. This kind of message is unacceptable and is, essentially, a license to kill."

Thai NGO's, including the Asian Harm Reduction Network and the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Campaign are making the following demands of the Thai government and are seeking International support to achieve them:

1. Include those Directly Affected in all Decision Making: People who use drugs and civil society must be involved in the response.
2. Stop the Drug War: repressive and compulsory approaches to drug control and prevention do not work, and have not worked
3. Respect Public Health Principles and Measures: the Ministry of Public Health must be at the forefront and coordinate the public health response to drugs, and assume this leadership immediately
4. Provide International Support and Solidarity: The UN must invest in technical and other leadership for Thailand and the SEARO region, for harm reduction.

5. Respect Human and Civil Rights: The Prime Minister and Interior Minister must renounce all deaths and extrajudicial actions taken against Thai citizens. The government must include a plan of how they will respect human rights. Trainings must be given to the police to reduce stigma and to familiarize themselves with public health and harm reduction policy

6. Provide Universal Access to ALL People in Thailand!: Thailand can not achieve its goal of universal access without implementing harm reduction policies. Also, services must be targeted, specifically, for people who use drugs, sexual minorities, sex workers, people in prison and migrant workers.

Actions Taken So Far:

Ø In response to this TTAG has planned a demonstration on the opening day of the UNAIDS Programme Board Committee in Chiang Mai on April 23rd, 2008 at 12:30 pm-Chiang Mai Holiday Inn.

Ø Members of the UNAIDS PCB who represent civil society have written a letter to Peter Piot, the head of UNAIDS. They demand that he meet with Thai officials and urge for a policy change.

Ø NYCAHN/VOCAL, a membership organization in NYC for drug users and their allies are holding a solidarity demonstration at the NYC Thai embassy on April 23rd at 12:30 a.m. EST. This rally will be held simultaneously with a protest at the Chiangmai Holiday Inn, Thailand.

Ø Activists are also planning demonstrations in Washington, DC and Chicago.

For more information about the Thai Drug War, please call Jennifer Flynn, Health GAP at (917) 517-5202 or Paisan Suwannawong (Thai and English)

+66-81-824-5434 (in Thailand, 081-824-5434

Or go to www.hrw.org <<http://www.hrw.org/>> , www.ttag.info

<<http://www.ttag.info/>> , www.healthgap.org

<<http://www.healthgap.org/>>

Press articles can be found at www.bbc.com <<http://www.bbc.com/>> , the Bangkok Post and the Thailand Nation.