

**Embargoed for release:
Wednesday, July 14, 2004 18:00 Bangkok time (GMT 11:00)
(for Thursday's papers)**



Thailand: Drug Users' Honoured for Courage in Face of Crackdown *Award presented to pioneering NGO at International AIDS Conference*

BANGKOK, July 14, 2004 – The Thai Drug Users' Network, which has worked to protect the human rights of drug users in Thailand even during a brutal anti-drug crackdown that resulted in as many as 3000 killings, today received the Award for Action on AIDS and Human Rights conferred by Human Rights Watch and the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network.

“During a crackdown that cost the lives of many drug users, the Thai Drug Users' Network threw a spotlight on horrific human rights abuses, informed drug users of their rights, and worked for policy change,” said Joanne Csete, director of the HIV/AIDS Program at Human Rights Watch. “The network's courageous and peaceful work in the face of atrocious violence exemplify human rights heroism of the first order.”

Health experts worldwide have praised Thailand's national AIDS program since the country's successful “100 percent condom” campaign in the 1990s. But drug users have not figured in the national AIDS response, and HIV prevalence among drug users remains at over 40 percent, the same level as in the late 1980s.

Founded in 2002, the Thai Drug Users' Network (TDN) has worked with few resources to help drug users throughout the country protect themselves from HIV and other blood-borne diseases. It has organized peaceful protests that have brought state abuses against drug users to national and global attention.

TDN recently became one of only two nongovernmental organizations in the world to be awarded a grant from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, a grant made possible under Global Fund rules when the Thai government's official application excluded all consideration of HIV prevention services for drug users.

“The Global Fund grant will enable TDN to extend its life-saving work to many more Thais who remain at very high risk for HIV,” said Ralf Jürgens, executive director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “With TDN's dedication and these new resources, we can hope that injection drug users in Thailand will soon have access to syringe exchange and other services that have saved so many lives in other countries.”

In a report entitled “Not Enough Graves” (<http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/aids/2004/thai.htm>) issued last week, Human Rights Watch documented abuses associated with the anti-drug crackdown, which began in February 2003, and the way in which these abuses and fear of further abuse drove drug users into hiding and out of reach of AIDS programs. In this way, the Thai “war on drugs” reversed many of the country’s gains in combating HIV/AIDS.

Previous recipients of the Award for Action on AIDS and Human Rights include Wan Yanhai of China, the AIDS Law Project of South Africa, and the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users.

For more information on the Thai Drug Users’ Network, please see the background briefing “Courage in the Face of Death”: <http://www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/awards.htm>

For more information about the *Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights* see: www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/awards.htm

-30-

Contacts in Bangkok:

Joanne Csete/Jonathan Cohen +66 (0)4 017 8471
Ralf Jürgens +66 (0)6 743 4904
Thomas Haig +66 (0)6 743 4903 or
thaig@aidslaw.ca

Contact in New York:

Rebecca Schleifer +1 212 216 1273

Contact in Montreal:

Elana Wright +1 514 397-6828, ext. 259 or
ewright@aidslaw.ca

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) was founded in 1992 to promote the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, advocacy, and community mobilization. The Network is Canada’s leading advocacy organization for legal, ethical and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) is an independent, non-governmental organization that conducts regular, systematic investigations of human rights abuses in about eighty countries around the world. Its reputation for timely, reliable disclosures has made it an essential source of information for those concerned with human rights. Human Rights Watch addresses the human rights practices of governments of all political stripes, of all geopolitical alignments, and of all ethnic and religious persuasions. It defends freedom of thought and expression, due process and equal protection of the law, and a vigorous civil society; it documents and denounces abuses of internationally recognized human rights. Its goal is to hold governments accountable if they transgress the rights of their people. Human Rights Watch began in 1978, and today includes divisions covering Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East as well as three thematic divisions on arms, children's rights, and women's rights, and special programs on business and human rights and HIV/AIDS. The organization maintains offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Moscow, and Tashkent.