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NGOs welcome renewed focus on AIDS, but say pledge falls short

OTTAWA – Canadian non-governmental organizations working for universal access to HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment globally welcomed the federal government's AIDS pledge made public today, but said it fails to break new ground.

The announcement contains no commitment to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, reflects only current levels of funding for microbicides and vaccines research, and says nothing about removing the red tape blocking the export of affordable generic medicines.

Robert Fox, Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, said: "Any money is welcome, but this announcement reflects business as usual. With 8,000 people dying every day from a disease that is preventable and treatable, it falls short of Canadians' expectations for a serious response."

"While today's commitment is a positive step, the fight against AIDS and the struggle against poverty are inextricably linked. Canada must make a larger and sustained commitment to provide essential resources to civil society organizations on the front lines of this pandemic through the Global Fund and increased development assistance," said **Karen Takacs, Executive Director of Canadian Crossroads International**.

Richard Elliott, Deputy Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network called for swift action to follow through on Canada's unfulfilled pledge to supply more affordable medicines to developing countries. "It's been over two years since Parliament unanimously passed legislation for the export of lower-cost, generic drugs," he said. "But not a single pill has gone anywhere. We know the changes needed. Will the government act, and will Parliament ensure they do so?"

Gerry Barr, Co-chair Make Poverty History, said: "Poverty fuels the AIDS pandemic and AIDS is relegating millions to live and die in poverty. The government needs to set a timetable to reach the international target for foreign aid spending of 0.7% of Gross National Income."

"This contribution is welcome and I congratulate the government for coming through," said **A John Watson**, **President and CEO of CARE Canada**. "However, the risk of becoming infected with HIV and the likelihood of maintaining any level of health once infected are inextricably linked with poverty and inequality. We need projects in communities, better health systems, and investments like the long awaited promise of 0.7% of GNI committed to development assistance."

The Global Treatment Action Group's platform for action, proposes Four Steps for Canada:

- Pay our fair share of prevention and treatment in developing countries. Canada should commit to a binding timetable to bring its official development assistance to 0.7% of gross national income, double its research and development funding for HIV prevention tools such as microbicides and vaccines, and show leadership by contributing 5% of the total funding needed by the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria over each of the next five years.
- Invest in the public health care systems of developing countries. Canada should provide development assistance for public health care systems in developing countries, support greater retention of health care workers in developing countries, and implement policies to better train and retain health professionals in Canada as an alternative to recruiting health professionals from developing countries.
- Cancel the debts of developing countries to free up resources to fight AIDS and poverty. Canada should promote the immediate and unconditional cancellation of 100% of the debt owed by countries burdened by AIDS, debt and poverty.
- Follow through on commitments to make medicines affordable to developing countries. In 2004, Parliament unanimously passed a law to enable exports of lower-cost, generic medicines to developing countries. But no medicines have yet been sent. Canada should broker exploratory meetings between Canadian generic manufacturers and health ministries in developing countries, and remove unnecessary red tape that dissuades generic drug manufacturers and developing countries from using the law.

Since Toronto hosted the XVI International AIDS Conference in August, close to 750,000 people have died of AIDS-related causes and over a million women, men and children have become infected with HIV/AIDS, according to UN estimates.

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The Global Treatment Access Group (www.aidslaw/gtag) is a working group of international development, human rights, humanitarian, and AIDS service organizations, trade unions, student groups, and faith-based groups seeking to improve access to essential medicines and other aspects of HIV prevention and care, treatment and support for people living with HIV/AIDS in developing countries.