

23 September 2011

House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 0A6

To: Right Hon. Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada
Hon. Leona Aglukkaq, Minister of Health
Hon. John Baird, Minister of Foreign Affairs
Hon. Bev Oda, Minister of International Cooperation
Nycole Turmel, Leader of the New Democratic Party and of the Official Opposition
Hon. Bob Rae, Leader of the Liberal Party
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party
Louis Plamondon, Bloc Québécois President of the Caucus
Libby Davies, NDP Health Critic
Paul Dewar, NDP Foreign Affairs Critic
Hélène Laverdière, NDP International Cooperation Critic
Hon. Mark Eyking, Liberal Party International Cooperation Critic
Hon. Hedy Fry, Liberal Party Health Critic
Hon. Dominic Leblanc, Liberal Party Foreign Affairs Critic

Re: Russia and the Millennium Development Goals

We, the undersigned non-governmental organizations representing affected communities and working in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention, care and treatment, in Canada and around the world, address you in advance of the Millennium Development Goal 6 (MDG 6) International Forum taking place in Moscow, Russia on October 10–12, 2011. This meeting is a critical opportunity to urge the governments of countries from the region to live up to their commitments in meeting MDG 6 goals by 2015.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia has one of the fastest growing HIV epidemics in the world, with Russia and Ukraine together accounting for 90 percent of new HIV infections in this region.¹ Injecting drug use remains a major driver of the epidemic in these countries. In Russia, the number of opiate users is estimated at 1.7 million,² the majority administering opiates through injecting. Globally, 37 percent of people who inject drugs live with HIV,³ and in some regions of Russia, HIV prevalence amongst people who inject drugs is as high as 61 percent.⁴

Russia has positioned itself as a regional leader in the fight against HIV/AIDS, despite the fact that it is currently providing very limited funding for evidence-based HIV prevention among people who inject drugs. Critical HIV prevention programs for drug users, including needle and syringe programs (NSP), are currently supported largely through the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. This external funding is time-bound and is currently only reaching an estimated 7 percent of those in need of these vital services.⁵ Opiate substitution therapy (OST), recognized by the WHO, UNAIDS and UNODC as the most effective means of opioid dependence treatment and of reducing HIV among people who inject drugs, is illegal. Such an approach is untenable given the nature of the epidemic in Russia as well as the wider region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Russia's rejection of these evidence-based policies — endorsed by UN

member countries in the 2009 *Political Declaration and Plan of Action on International Cooperation Towards an Integrated and Balanced Strategy to Counter the World Drug Problem* — leave it ill-qualified to play the role of regional leader in building an effective HIV response.

In other countries of the region, much more has been done to address the HIV epidemic among most vulnerable groups, but a lack of essential harm reduction services has been reported in most of the countries and territories with documented injecting drug use.⁶ Furthermore, in almost all countries where NSP and OST are available, coverage remains too low to have an impact on the epidemic.^{7, 8}

We respectfully appeal to your government to use the opportunity of the MDG 6 Forum to highlight the following messages:

- **Urge the Russian government to support critically needed programming** for those most at risk of HIV infection, including OST and NSP for people who inject drugs. Without this support, it will be impossible to meet the MDG by 2015.
- **Urge all governments of the region to reaffirm a health-centred approach to drugs** by scaling up current programs which provide harm reduction and HIV prevention services to people who inject drugs and other most at-risk groups.

Signatories:

Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network
Canadian AIDS Society
Canadian AIDS Treatment Information
Exchange
Canadian Harm Reduction Network
Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network
Centre for Addictions Research of BC,
University of Victoria

Interagency Coalition on AIDS and
Development
Streetworks
Urban Health Research Initiative, BC Centre
for Excellence in HIV/AIDS
AMAN Program for Adolescents health and
AIDS (Gaza Strip)

¹ UNAIDS GLOBAL REPORT, fact sheet on Eastern Europe and Central Asia

² UNODC World Drug Report, 2011, p. 51

³ UNODC World Drug Report, 2009, p. 57

⁴ Federal Service for Surveillance of Consumer Rights Protection and Human Well-Being of the Russian Federation (Rospotrebnadzor), *Country Progress Report of the Russian Federation on the Implementation of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS — Adopted at the 26th UNGASS, June 2001* (Reporting period January 2008 – December 2009), 2008.

⁵ Bradley M. Mathers, et al., for the 2009 Reference Group to the UN on HIV and Injecting Drug Use HIV prevention, treatment, and care services for people who inject drugs: a systematic review of global, regional, and national coverage. Note that the estimate was done in 2009, before a number of NSP sites were closed in Russia.

⁶ 2001 *Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS*, UNGA Special Session on HIV/AIDS, 25–27 June 2001, paragraph 7.

⁷ *Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS*, UNGA Res 60/262, 2 June 2006, paragraph 14.

⁸ Cook C., *The Global State of Harm Reduction: Key Issues for Broadening the Response*, 2010. London: International Harm Reduction Association.