



Aids conference tackles discrimination

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By Firas al-Atraqchi in Toronto

The 16th international Aids conference opened in Toronto with a call for an end to the discrimination and politicisation of the deadly virus.

In front of a thousands-strong audience at the AIDS 2006 conference held at the metro Toronto convention centre in downtown Toronto, Indonesia's Frika Chia Iskandar called on the world to overcome the stigma of the disease and the discrimination HIV-positive persons face every day.

She recalled how a dentist refused to treat her because she had Aids.

"As the new face of Aids, I know I can deliver, can you?" asked Iskandar, representing the seven sisters non-profit group for people with the virus, to a standing ovation.

The general theme running through the conference is that treatment and provision of funds for underdeveloped countries combating the disease is becoming increasingly a political issue, diverting focus from what should be an emergent health crisis.

Racism, inequality

Dr Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, speaking on behalf of the UN secretary-general said: "First and foremost we must maintain the exceptionality of Aids from the political agenda."

He called on the world community to fight homophobia, racism and inequality.

With a passing allusion to the conflict ravaging the Middle East, he said: "We must fight the epidemic and not fight each other."

He sounded a sombre tone: "Ours is a world in which we live with HIV; tragically the end of Aids is nowhere in sight."

Twenty minutes into the opening ceremony a dozen or so protesters tried to interrupt the proceedings by shouting their demands that there be an end to Aids discrimination in the workplace.

Condom use

Bill and Melinda Gates took to the stage and promised a \$500million fund to fight Aids throughout the world.



"We need tools to allow women to protect themselves," Bill Gates told the conference, highlighting that too much emphasis had been placed on men in the global fight against the virus.

Melinda Gates spoke of her trips to Africa and Asia where she met with women and children shunned by their families and culture.

She said: "Stigma is so cruel. It is also irrational.

"Stigma makes it easier for political leaders to stand in the way of saving lives," she said highlighting that world cultures must not prohibit the use of condoms.



Melinda Gates promoted the need for condoms to save lives

"If you stand in the way of condoms something is more important to you than saving lives."

Politics still present

But the conference could not escape the political limelight.

Missing from those attending the conference was Stephen Harper, the Canadian prime minister, who has been criticised in the media for his absence.

Louise Binder, co-chair of the federal ministerial advisory council on Aids, told the media a few days before the conference opened, that "this is the most serious health problem the globe has ever seen, and we're hosting the largest conference with the most media that's ever been and our prime minister can't come and say a few words of welcome".

Harper is visiting the Nunavut territory near the Northwest Passage.

Nevertheless, Jack Layton, the New Democratic Party (NDP) leader, was in attendance as was William Graham, the former foreign minister and Michaëlle Jean, the governor-general.

Jean sounded a note of optimism.

Addressing the conference, she said: "One day soon we will be able to put an end to one of the most insidious epidemics of our time."

The conference is attended by delegates from 134 countries comprising more than 20,000 scientists, health care workers, political leaders, financiers, NGOs, and international bodies as well as many already living with the epidemic.

Bill Clinton, the former US president, will address the conference on Tuesday.

The conference lasts five days and closes on August 18.