

## UN offers new global Aids strategy

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03 June 2006 07:42

A high-level United Nations meeting on Aids agreed on Friday on a global strategy to fight the epidemic -- but civil groups slammed the strategy for a lack of specific commitments and for coy references to high-risk groups like prostitutes.

Government and UN negotiators had worked until 3.30am local time to thrash out the final draft of the hotly debated political declaration that was adopted by the UN General Assembly at the end of the three-day conference in New York.

Assembly president Jan Eliasson insisted that the declaration is "a good, substantial and forward-looking document" that contains stronger language than might have been expected given deep divisions over issues such as sexual practices and gender equality.

Eliasson noted specific pledges to empower women and girls, as well as detailed language on HIV prevention, including explicit references to male and female condom use.

Such references had been opposed by certain Muslim and conservative Latin American countries.

The declaration -- the first of its kind since a landmark UN Aids summit in 2001 -- aims to lay down a blueprint for achieving the goal of universal access to Aids prevention, treatment and care by 2010.

But the draft stops short of listing those most at risk to HIV infection, such as sex workers, intravenous drug users and homosexuals, and opts instead for the euphemistic term "vulnerable groups".

While it "recognises" the UN estimate that \$20-billion to \$23-billion in annual funding will be needed to support scaled-up Aids responses by 2010, it offers no binding commitment to achieving that goal.

"We are furious," said Aditi Sharma, HIV/Aids campaign and policy coordinator for ActionAid International.

"It is incomprehensible how negotiators could come up with such a weak declaration when we needed urgent action to stop 8 500 people dying and 13 500 people from becoming infected every day," Sharma said.

Aids has killed more than 25-million people since it was first recognised in 1981, according to the UN Joint Programme on HIV/Aids (UNAids), the UN agency coordinating the fight against the disease.

Gender equality was one of the more contentious topics under debate at the meeting, and the final draft contains fresh language pledging countries to allow women greater control over their sexual and reproductive health, "free of coercion, discrimination and violence".

UNAids executive director Peter Piot said the declaration represents "the next stage" in the fight against Aids.

"Even though we may have differences of tactics, as was clear this week, we are all a critical piece of the same strategy," said Piot, who praised the input of the action groups attending the conference but rejected their suggestions that the document is blinkered and ineffective.



"Everybody will find something that is missing in it," Piot said. "But, for the first time, a number of some of the most controversial issues in Aids are in there with an internationally agreed text."

The need for preventive education -- particularly for young women -- was highlighted at the opening of Friday's session by United States First Lady Laura Bush.

"More people need to know how Aids is transmitted -- and every country has an obligation to educate its citizens," Bush told the packed General Assembly hall.

"This is why every country must also improve literacy, especially for women and girls, so they can learn to make wise choices that will keep them healthy and safe," she said. -- AFP

