



ACT UP New York | African Services Committee | Health GAP (Global Access Project)

PRESS RELEASE

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CONTACT: Sharonann Lynch - 646.645.5225; Aaron Boyle - 917.621.6667

AIDS ACTIVIST PROTEST UGANDA'S CONDOM SHORTAGE: CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT TO UNLOCK THE CONDOMS AND REJECT ABSTINENCE ONLY APPROACHES

AIDS activists protest at Ugandan Mission to the United Nations as Uganda's much-lauded HIV prevention program erodes into U.S. financed abstinence-until-marriage approaches.

(Manhattan) A coalition of AIDS activists held a demonstration in midtown Manhattan outside of the Ugandan Permanent Mission to the United Nations today to bring attention to that nation's severe condom shortage which is putting people at dangerous risk of HIV infection. The crisis has developed over the past ten months as the government of Uganda has stopped its robust program of public sector condom distribution. These condoms previously accounted for 80% of condoms available in the country.

50 activists delivered a giant key to Mission officials labeled: "Unlock the condoms. Unlock the truth: Condoms Work." Responding to media reports yesterday, the Ministry of Health denied the condom shortage exists.

Since May 2004, new shipments--some 30 million quality-approved condoms--have been sitting in government warehouses. Activists are demanding to know why, nearly a year into the shortage, health clinics are still unsupplied and the government is refusing to state when or how they will distribute the condoms. "This crisis could have been averted by the government long ago. The condoms are there, but what is in woeful shortage is the political will of Ugandan leaders to distribute them and promote condom use," said Sharonann Lynch of Health GAP.

"This apparent 'Zero Condom Policy' of Uganda marks another alarming shift away from the government's established HIV prevention approaches which have been at work since the early 1980's," said Aaron Boyle of Health GAP. Uganda was able to achieve a significant drop in HIV prevalence from 15% to 6% over the past two decades, which many experts attribute to comprehensive prevention efforts, including social promotion of condoms. Now activists in Uganda say the program has been overtaken by abstinence-until-marriage approaches as President Yoweri Museveni and First Lady Janet Museveni are aligning Uganda's policies with the ideology touted--and financed--by the United States government.

Uganda is a country receiving funds from the President Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). The program requires a minimum of 33% of its prevention funds to be used for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, and limits the distribution of condoms to specific high-risk groups. "The strident prevention politics tied to the Bush administration's AIDS funding are undermining sound prevention in the name of abstinence-only approaches. Scientific studies have shown the inadequacy of such methods, and President Museveni is neglecting the public health of Ugandans by bowing to Bush's pressure," said Eustacia Smith of ACT UP.

Today's protesters, including members of ACT UP New York, African Services Committee, the Bondala group of Harlem United, Health GAP, are demanding the release of condoms and a return to condoms as an integral and effective prevention strategy in Uganda's HIV/AIDS program.

Note for editors:

1. For a transcript from an international journalist teleconference about the Uganda condom shortage held Monday, August 29 with Beatrice Were of ActionAid Uganda and Health Rights Action Group, Zackie Achmat of

Treatment Action Campaign, UN Special Envoy on AIDS in Africa Stephen Lewis, and Jodi Jacobson of the Center for Health and Gender Equity, contact Sharonann Lynch at salynch@healthgap.org

2. Photographs from today's protest will be made available at <http://www.genderhealth.org/uganda.php>
3. In late 2004, the Government recalled *Engabu* brand condoms, causing an immediate crisis in condom supplies. This crisis has deepened as the Government of Uganda has failed to replenish condom stocks and as attacks on the *Engabu* brand have eroded public confidence in the brand and in condoms generally. For additional background information see "Fighting to close the condom gap in Uganda," *The Lancet*, Vol 365 March 26, 2005. 1127. Available at: <http://www.genderhealth.org/pubs/Lancet0305.pdf>

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