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Criminalising sex workers, gays raises AIDS risk in Asia

VIENNA: The criminalisation of sex workers, drug users and men who had sex with men were highlighted as major sources of concern in the fight against HIV in Asia, at the world AIDS conference here on Wednesday.

Twenty-five countries in Asia Pacific still impose the death penalty for offences related to the possession and abuse of drugs, creating a huge stigma.

This means abusers often avoid treatment for fear of imprisonment, said Anand Grover, a lawyer and special rapporteur for the United Nations Human Rights Council.

Injected drug use is acknowledged as one of the main causes of the spread of AIDS worldwide, alongside sexual transmission.

In some countries, "drug users still have to go to jail before they actually can access harm reduction services", said Rachel Ong, of the Asia Pacific Network of People Living with HIV.

Also, more than 15 countries penalise consensual same-sex behaviour, pushing potential HIV patients further underground, according to Anand.

This trend of criminalisation was not customary for the region but rather an "alien British colonial legacy and we have to get rid of it", he said provocatively.

In parts of India, small tablets of opium were traditional gifts, he noted, adding that in earlier times, "sex workers... were revered, they were given a high status".

Ong criticised that Asian governments lacked visibility in the fight against HIV/AIDS compared with the richer nations, which donated much of the aid to fighting the disease.

Meanwhile, sex workers sought to raise awareness of discrimination and AIDS with a colourful fashion show on the sidelines of the conference.

Strutting sexily — or shyly — down an improvised catwalk, sex workers and activists drew a large crowd at the Global Village where non-governmental or-

ganisations have set up booths.

The collection featured skimpy yellow shorts with thin braces, a mini-skirt over red fishnet tights and frilly dresses, with condoms in bright packaging sticking out of bodices or pockets as a reminder of the theme.

It was designed by Daspu, a Brazilian label set up in 2005 by a former prostitute now involved in defending sex workers' rights and named from "das putas", which means "from the whores" in Portuguese. — AFP



Sex workers and activists participating in the fashion show during the AIDS conference in Vienna on Wednesday. — AFP picture