

Headline **China ends entry ban for foreigners with HIV/AIDS**
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China ends entry ban for foreigners with HIV/AIDS

I commend President Hu Jintao for China's decision to remove travel restrictions based on HIV status.

Ban Ki-moon, UN Secretary-General

BEIJING: China has revoked a ban on people with HIV/AIDS entering the country, softening a decades-old policy that drew sharp criticism this year when an Australian writer was blocked after declaring himself HIV-positive.

Until now, China's regulations formally banned foreigners entering the country with "psychiatric illness, leprosy, AIDS, sexually-transmitted diseases, active pulmonary tuberculosis or other infectious diseases."

The State Council, China's cabinet, issued amended rules late on Tuesday removing the explicit ban on people who have developed AIDS or are infected with the HIV retrovirus, as well as anyone with leprosy, while leaving authorities leeway to decide which diseases could trigger an entry ban.

The United Nations welcomed the decision as an important step towards ending discrimination against people living with

HIV.

"I commend President Hu Jintao for China's decision to remove travel restrictions based on HIV status," UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in a statement.

"Punitive policies and practices only hamper the global AIDS response.

I urge all other countries with such restrictions to remove them as a matter of priority and urgency."

Travel restrictions, which are imposed in some form by dozens of countries worldwide, do not prevent transmission of the disease or protect public health, the statement added.

China's new rules, posted on the central government website (www.gov.cn), still block foreigners "with serious psychiatric illness, infectious pulmonary tuberculosis or other

infectious diseases that may constitute a major threat to public health".

The amended regulations did not say whether AIDS/HIV would be among the infectious diseases that people seeking Chinese visas must declare when applying, possibly leaving officials some leeway on how to apply the rule.

But an unnamed legal affairs official for the State Council indicated that AIDS/HIV would not be a bar to entry.

"Restricting foreigners with these diseases from entering the country has played an extremely limited role in our country's disease prevention and control work, and instead has repeatedly become an impediment to our hosting a variety of international events," the official told the Legal Daily.

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In March, more than 90 Australian authors signed a letter decrying China's refusal to grant a visa to one of the country's most celebrated writers, Robert Dassaix, who is HIV-positive.

On Friday, Shanghai opens its World Expo, a multi-billion dollar exhibition that is China's latest effort to promote an image as a forward-looking and open country.

The HIV virus can be spread through unprotected sex, sharing of infected needles and blood, and — without preventive drugs — to children in the womb of infected mothers or who take milk from an infected woman.

If untreated, the virus attacks the immune system, leading to full-blown AIDS, a deadly condition.

China has 560,000 to 920,000 people infected with the HIV virus and 97,000 to 112,000 AIDS patients, according to 2009 Ministry of Health and United Nations estimates. — Reuters