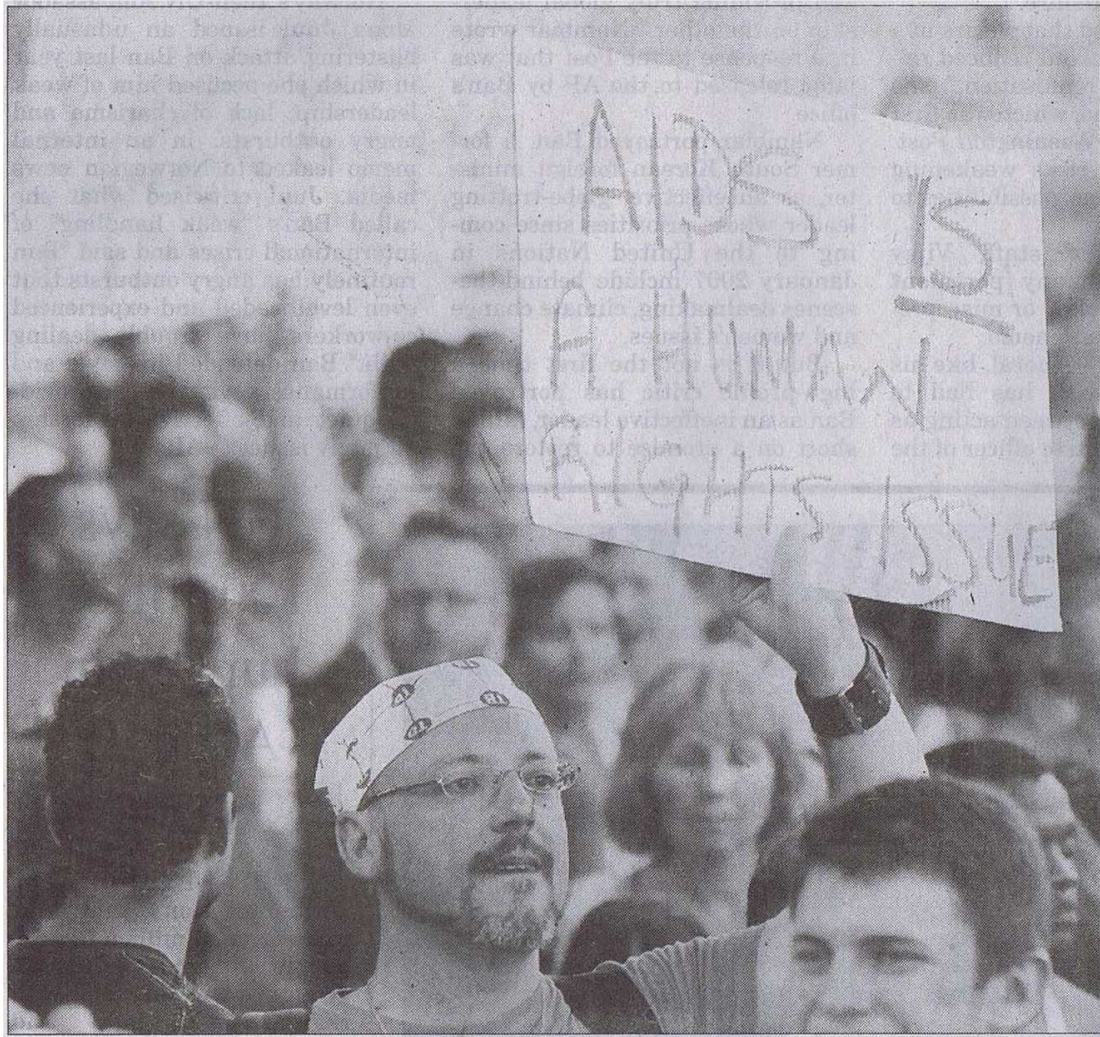


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World
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Protesters demand more support for AIDS victims at a protest in Vienna, Austria.

Anti-gay laws in Asia- Pacific spreading AIDS

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VIENNA: Laws criminalising gay sex in many countries in the Asia-Pacific region is pushing infection rates of HIV and AIDS to "alarming" levels, the United Nations Development Programme said Wednesday.

"Some 19 of 48 countries in the Asia Pacific region continue to criminalise male-to-male sex," UNDP said at the World AIDS Conference being held in Vienna this week.

"These laws often taken on the force of vigilantism, frequently leading to abuse and human rights violations. Correspondingly, HIV prevalence has reached alarming levels among men who have sex with men and transgender populations in many countries of the region," the statement said.

A new report, commissioned by UNDP and the Asia Pacific Coalition on Male Sexual Health (APCOM), found that by criminalising gay men and transsexuals, people were being denied access to treatment and health services.

"Repressive legal environments institutionalise discrimination, limit funding and in effect obstruct the participation of men who have sex with men and transgender people in protecting themselves and their families, friends and communities from HIV," said Jeff O'Malley, director of UNDP's HIV Practice.

And he called for the abolition of "punitive laws and discriminatory practices."

APCOM head Shivananda Khan said that unnecessary infection could be prevented by ensuring that "all citizens of a country, irrespective of their sexual orientation or gender identity can access health services."

The report's author, John Goodwin said that "comprehensive and rights-based HIV responses among men who have sex with men and transgender people can occur only when a conducive and enabling legal environment is created." – AFP