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DEMONSTRATORS march in Vienna's streets as part of the 18th International AIDS Conference in Vienna. PHOTO:AFP

Thousands march in Vienna for rights of AIDS patients

VIENNA: Several thousand activists and anti-AIDS campaigners marched through Vienna's city centre on Tuesday evening, demanding more respect for human rights in the fight against HIV.

Men and women of all ages, nationalities and sexual orientation paraded down the famous Ring boulevard in the early evening, carrying banners and accompanied by vuvuzelas and loud whistles.

Julio Montaner, director of the International AIDS Society (IAS), which organised the world AIDS conference in Vienna, led the march, alongside the head of UNAIDS Michel Sidibe, and Michel Kazatchkine, head of the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis

and Malaria.

"Even if we had the resources and the technology, we could not achieve universal access to treatment for patients without respect for human rights," Kazatchkine told AFP amidst the noisy crowd.

Auma Obama, the half-sister of US President Barack Obama, who helps US charity CARE's anti-AIDS efforts in her native Kenya, also attended and did a little dance with her fellow demonstrators.

The march ended at Vienna's historic Heldenplatz (Heroes' Square), where Sidibe and Kazatchkine joined voices with other activists to call for more funds for the fight against AIDS as well as "Rights Here, Right Now" - the

slogan of the Vienna conference.

Singer and AIDS activist Annie Lennox performed a few songs but also swung scorching criticism at governments in eastern Europe, where the AIDS epidemic is spreading the fastest, shouting: "Where are you? A catastrophe is taking place in your backyard and you're ignoring it."

As for conference host Austria, "your one-million-euro donation to the Global Fund in 2002 is embarrassing," she stormed.

"This event alone will have generated over 45 million euros for the city of Vienna: set the example, put your money where your mouth is and donate generously to the Global Fund," she urged. - AFP