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Main message of AIDS conference gets hushed

VIENNA

Few countries appear to want to alter battle on drugs to fight disease

BY DONALD G. MCNEIL JR.

Some of the world's top AIDS experts issued a radical manifesto this week at the 18th International AIDS Conference: They declared the war on drugs a 50-year-old failure and called for it to be abandoned.

NEWS ANALYSIS

No one heard.

Officially, the theme of the AIDS meeting, one of the world's largest public health gatherings, was the need to attack the rapidly growing epidemic among addicts in Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia. It was held in Vienna because this city is the doorway to the East; in this German-speaking country, all the conference signs were in English and Russian.

But the organizers' efforts to get publicity for the Vienna Declaration, which calls for drug users to be spared arrest and offered clean needles, methadone and treatment if they have AIDS, have come to naught. Almost no one here was talking about the war on drugs.

Instead, everyone was publicly worrying that the war on AIDS was falling apart. Donor money has evaporated during the recession and its aftermath, and it is looking probable that only about a third of the 33 million infected people in the world will have any hope of treatment.

Many activists blamed the administration of President Barack Obama, which is shifting its priorities to mother-and-child health. The halls were decorated with posters comparing Mr. Obama unfavorably with George W. Bush, his predecessor. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa this week criticized Mr. Obama in an Op-Ed article in The New York Times and its global edition, the International Herald Tribune.

In his speech here, Bill Clinton, the former U.S. president, said Ambassador Eric Goosby, the Obama administration's global AIDS coordinator, "ought to get some kind of Purple Heart for showing up."

Still, a new report from the Kaiser Family Foundation, based in California, shows that the United States continues to give more for AIDS assistance than all other countries put together, accounting for 58 percent of contributions. Its donations are still going up slightly, while those from Europe, Canada, Japan and Australia are flat or falling.

Officials from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria say they fear they will not come close to



Protests this past week during the 18th International AIDS Conference in Vienna, top and above. While people attending the conference focused on declining contributions for AIDS assistance, a declaration called for drug users with the disease to be spared arrest.

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the \$17 billion target they set for their next donors' meeting, in September.

The Vienna Declaration is only the second time that the International AIDS Society has issued such a document. The last was the 2000 Durban Declaration, which reaffirmed that H.I.V. was the cause of AIDS. It was a response to the government of South Africa, the conference's host, which at the time denied that the virus caused disease and refused to buy medicine for its citizens.

Outside of Africa, almost a third of all H.I.V. infections stem from drug injection.

The declaration contends that arresting drug users forces them into hiding, spreading the epidemic. It backs "sci-

ence-based public health approaches" proved in clinical trials, which can include everything from clean needle swaps to 12-step recovery programs and methadone, the heroin substitute.

Dr. Evan Wood, an AIDS policy expert at the University of British Columbia and the chief author, cited Portugal's approach. According to a 2009 report by the Cato Institute, a U.S. libertarian research group, in the decade since Portugal legalized possession of up to 10 days' worth of any drug, including cocaine and heroin, its AIDS rate dropped by half, overdose deaths fell, many citizens sought treatment, drug use among young people fell and drug tourism did not develop. The institute called the policy "a resounding success."

The declaration is largely aimed at countries of the former Soviet Union. In Russia, for example, close to 1 percent of the adult population is infected.

Nonetheless, the country forbids all methadone-type treatments, and the national health plan offers only abrupt

detoxification, which has a high failure rate. The most frequent victims — prisoners and people not living in their assigned residence areas — are the least likely to get AIDS drugs, and activists say markups vastly inflate the prices of medications bought cheaply by foreign donors.

"The government says everything is fine," said Aleksandra Volgina, 31, the leader of Candle, a Russian AIDS organization based in St. Petersburg. "We're even donors to the Global Fund, but we don't have treatment; we don't even have prevention."

Despite the quasi-Russian cast to the conference, no one from the Russian government attended, sponsors said.

Only two governments reacted to the declaration: Canada, which rejected it, and Georgia, whose first lady signed it in a public ceremony. The tiny former Soviet republic has a history of brutal treatment of drug addicts, Dr. Wood said. But it also has taken to defying Russia, with which it fought a brief war in 2008.

In the large U.S. delegation here, almost every top official refused to discuss the declaration. Finally, one government official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said he had just called the White House for guidance and was told that no one had read it yet and that there was no time to respond.

He did note that Dr. Goosby recently announced that countries getting U.S. help to fight AIDS could use it to buy clean needles for addicts, a change from Bush administration policy.

An exception to the official U.S. silence was Dr. Nora D. Volkow, the normally low-profile director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, who said she personally agreed with the declaration's premise.

"Addiction is a brain disease," she said. "I'm a scientist. The evidence unequivocally shows that criminalizing the drug abuser does not solve the problem. I'm very much against legalization of drugs or drug dealing. But I would not arrest a person addicted to drugs. I'd send them to treatment, not prison."