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UNICEF warns: Demand for child sex is linked to spread of HIV/AIDS

NAIROBI / GENEVA /NEW YORK, 28 November 2001 - The head of the United Nations Children's Fund said today that one of the most troubling and complex aspects of the spread of HIV/AIDS is its link to the widespread sexual exploitation of children.

"Whether it is myths about the curative powers of sex with young girls, or macho attitudes that sanction violent sexual behaviour toward women and girls, the links between sexual abuse of children and the spread of HIV/AIDS are clear," said UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy.

Bellamy said that children who are forced into the sex trade - estimated to be 1 million every year - are the most vulnerable to contracting and then spreading HIV/AIDS, and she called for more direct action aimed at challenging accepted sexual behaviours, as well as action to protect children from the sex trade to begin with.

Bellamy's comments come as UNICEF gears up for the 2nd World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, December 17-20 in Yokohama, Japan, which UNICEF is co-sponsoring with ECPAT International, the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Government of Japan.

Research and preparatory meetings for the Yokohama Congress have highlighted the need not only to protect the child victims of commercial sexual exploitation, but also to diminish the demand among the (mostly) male customers who abuse them. Contrary to popular belief, research shows that the majority of exploiters do not match the profile of the 'paedophile,' but are men who go to prostitutes and through either machismo or indifference choose ever younger children for sex.

Fuelling the demand for young girls in some parts of the world - particularly Asia and Africa - is ignorance about HIV/AIDS transmission and myths about the curative powers of virginity. Some exploiters believe that sex with a child is less risky because the child is more likely to be 'clean' and unable to transmit disease. In reality, children are physically more prone to bleeding, infection and disease. And they are rarely able to negotiate safe sex or fend off violent behaviour.

In some of the hardest-hit countries, teenage girls are infected at five-to-six times the rate of teenage boys. It is estimated that 11.8 million young people between 15-24 years of age are living with HIV/AIDS. More than 7,000 young people become infected each day.

At a recent preparatory meeting for the Yokohama Congress held in Rabat, Morocco, African delegates reported another link between HIV/AIDS and sexually exploited children. Since the beginning of the epidemic, twelve million children in sub-Saharan Africa have lost a mother or

both parents to HIV/AIDS. This figure is expected to more than double in the coming decade. These orphans are being drawn into the sex trade. Not only do they lose their family, these children are often plunged into deeper poverty, denied education, forced onto the streets and into labour - all situations that increase many-fold their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

UNICEF works in many different ways to protect those children most vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. In Rwanda, UNICEF works with child-headed households to provide school supplies so that the children can stay in school. In Haiti, UNICEF supports the training of peer

educators to help young people understand risky behaviour. In Madagascar and Zimbabwe, UNICEF supports special drop-in centres for abused children and women that also provide AIDS education. In Ukraine, where the growth in HIV/AIDS infection is the fastest in Europe and the vast majority of intravenous drug users are young people, UNICEF has established youth information centres and a telephone helpline.

But tackling the demand for sex with children is essential if the child sex-HIV/AIDS connection is to be broken. Bellamy said Yokohama would provide an opportunity to make concrete progress in this crucial area. "The sexual abuse of children - in the commercial sex trade and more generally - accelerates the spread of HIV, and we must not shy away from confronting exploiters and the sexual attitudes that allow them to abuse children in this way," Bellamy said. "We will call on everyone who can help us - governments, health workers, brothel operators, the media, school teachers, sex worker collectives, and people of influence. Tackling this issue openly and enlightening people's sexual attitudes and practices is the only way to protect children from this deplorable practice."

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To Broadcasters: A new B-roll videotape is available that highlights the commercial sexual exploitation of children and various programmes to prevent it. This 38-minute B-roll includes strong material filmed recently in Albania, the Philippines, Sierra Leone, India and Nicaragua. To preview scripts and sequences or to order a tape please visit: <http://www.unicef.org/broadcast/brolls/csec/>