

Three Georgian Leaders Sign Vienna Declaration, Strengthen Call for Science-Based Drug Policy

First Lady Sandra Roelofs, Deputy Chairman of Parliament George Tsereteli and Vice Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs Irakli Giorgobiani Show Support for Evidence-based Drug Policy

22 July 2010 [Vienna, Austria] –Sandra Roelofs, First Lady of Georgia; George Tsereteli, Georgia’s Deputy Chairman of Parliament; and Irakli Giorgobiani, Georgia’s Vice Minister of Labour, Health and Social Affairs, today signed the Vienna Declaration, the official declaration of the XVIII International AIDS conference (AIDS 2010) in Vienna, Austria.

The Vienna Declaration (www.viennadeclaration.com) is a scientific statement seeking to improve community health and safety by calling for the incorporation of scientific evidence into illicit drug policies. More than 12,580 people – including Nobel laureates and leaders in science, medicine and public policy – have signed the declaration since it was launched three weeks ago. The Declaration was published in the *Lancet* medical journal to coincide with AIDS 2010.

“Georgia supports evidence- based policy in our efforts to protect community health and safety,” said Roelofs, the wife of Mikheil Saakashvili, President of Georgia. “Our signatures on the Vienna Declaration reinforce our recognition that harm reduction can provide numerous benefits and highlights the need to design policies that align with emerging science.”

Georgia is moving forward with activities that are intended to ensure safer and healthier communities across the country by taking action in three priority areas: prevention, treatment and enforcement.

“The health of Georgians is paramount and therefore we are looking at many ways to improve the well-being of all of our citizens, including those facing challenges such as substance use and HIV,” said Giorgobiani.

Added Tsereteli: “We believe a scientific approach to drug policy is the way forward. We will move in support of evidence-based research and policy to optimize investments in public health, improve existing policies, and adopt much more effective and relevant legislation.”

In some areas of rapid HIV spread, such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia, injecting drug use is the primary cause of new HIV infections. In some countries, people who use drugs are threatened with arrest, incarceration and worse, and therefore are reluctant to access the necessary public health services.

“Misguided drug policies fuel the AIDS epidemic and result in violence, increased crime rates and destabilization of entire states – yet there is no evidence that they have reduced rates of drug use or drug supply,” said AIDS 2010 Chair Dr. Julio Montaner, President of the IAS and Director of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. “I welcome the endorsement of the

Vienna Declaration from these Georgian leaders; it provides great hope for the future in an area of the world being devastated by the HIV and AIDS epidemic.”

In much of the world, the current approach to drug policy is ineffective because it neglects proven and evidence-based interventions, while pouring a massive amount of public funds and human resources into expensive and futile enforcement measures. Legal barriers to scientifically proven prevention services such as needle programmes and opioid substitution therapy (OST) mean hundreds of thousands of people become infected with HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV) every year. In some areas of the world, the criminalization of people who inject drugs has also resulted in record incarceration rates placing a massive burden on taxpayers. An emphasis on criminalization produces a cycle of disease transmission, breaking homes and destroying livelihoods.

“Georgia is at risk of rising HIV rates due to epidemics in neighboring countries and a high rate of injection drug use, so it is gratifying to see this type of leadership and deep support for evidence-based policy-making in this area,” said Dr. Evan Wood, the chair of the Vienna Declaration writing committee and founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP).

The Vienna Declaration calls on governments and international organizations to take a number of steps, including:

- undertake a transparent review the effectiveness of current drug policies;
- implement and evaluate a science-based public health approach to address the harms stemming from illicit drug use;
- scale up evidence-based drug dependence treatment options;
- abolish ineffective compulsory drug treatment centres that violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; and
- unequivocally endorse and scale up funding for the drug treatment and harm reduction measures endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations.

The declaration also calls for the meaningful involvement of people who use drugs in developing, monitoring and implementing services and policies that affect their lives.

The Vienna Declaration is one step in pushing for support of science-based approaches to dealing with illicit drugs. The signature-gathering process aims to galvanise scientists and others working in illicit drug policy and place real and sustained pressure on policymakers to meaningfully consider the scientific evidence regarding the limited beneficial impact and negative unintended consequences of conventional illicit drug policies.

The impact of the Vienna Declaration will be measured over the coming years, and progress reports on the adoption of evidence-based policies will be presented at subsequent International AIDS Conferences. The adoption of the Vienna Declaration’s recommendations among high-level policymakers at the local, national, and international levels will also be tracked by the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy.

The Vienna Declaration was drafted by an international team of scientists and other experts. It was initiated by the IAS, the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP), and the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Those wishing to sign on may visit www.viennadeclaration.com, where the full text of the declaration, along with a list of authors, is available. The two-page declaration references 28 reports, describing the scientific evidence documenting the effectiveness of public health

approaches to drug policy and the negative consequences of approaches that criminalize drug users.

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BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) is Canada's largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility. The BC-CfE is based at St Paul's Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE is dedicated to improving the health of British Columbians with HIV through developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related diseases.

International Centre for Science in Drug Policy

ICSDP aims to be a primary source for rigorous scientific evidence on illicit drug policy in order to benefit policymakers, law enforcement, and affected communities. To this end, the ICSDP conducts original scientific research in the form of systematic reviews, evidence-based drug policy guidelines, and research collaborations with leading scientists and institutions across diverse continents and disciplines.

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Mahafrine Petigara
Edelman
Email: mahafrine.petigara@edelman.com
Tel: +1 604 623 3007, ext. 297

Michael Kessler
Media Consultant, AIDS 2010
Email: mkessler@ya.com
Tel: +34 655 792 699