

AIDS meeting demands more than lip service

Declan Butler, Barcelona

The top priority for AIDS researchers and activists is to press governments to translate words into actions, the 14th International AIDS Conference in Barcelona has been told.

The last such conference — in Durban, South Africa, two years ago — generated many promises of action, but most are so far unkept. Opening the Barcelona meeting on 7 July, Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, nonetheless said that it heralded “a new era — the era of AIDS as a global political issue”.

Some progress has been made since Durban. Spending on AIDS in poor countries has gone up, and many of these nations have established national strategies to fight the disease. Some countries that have implemented prevention and care programmes — notably Brazil and South Africa — have reversed the growth in HIV infection rates in their populations.

Drug companies have started making anti-retroviral treatments for AIDS more affordable — although these are still only available to a small number of patients in poor countries. And at the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June last year, governments set targets to reduce the spread of the disease and pledged to pay the US\$10 billion needed each year to fight the pandemic. Thus far, however, only \$2 billion of that has actually materialized.

Among positive developments so far this year, the release of the first grants from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (see *Nature* 416, 773–774; 2002) will support work on prevention and drug treatment. The grants aim to increase the availability of anti-retroviral drugs in developing countries. UNAIDS estimates that only 30,000 people in Africa currently have access to the drugs. The price of annual anti-retroviral drug treatments has come down to US\$300 in some cases, but Médecins sans Frontières, the Paris-based medical aid charity, said that this must fall to \$50.

The global fund's work is expected to make the drugs available to 550,000 people in poor countries by 2007 — still a small proportion of the 40 million people, 94% of them in developing nations, who carry the disease today. Three million babies are being born each year with HIV, Piot said.

Bernhard Schwartlander, director of the Department of HIV/AIDS at the World Health Organization, told the conference that by current projections there could be 45 million new cases of HIV/AIDS by 2010. If governments comply with the promises made to the United Nations, 29 million of these could be avoided, he said, adding that each year's delay in implementing the promises will cost 5 million lives.

In some African countries, prevalence of

HIV runs at over 30%, and is as much as 50% in some cities. Without urgent action, this pattern could be reproduced in parts of Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe, according to UNAIDS projections.

Prevention is becoming even more central to containing the pandemic, as most scientists now agree that anti-retroviral therapy will not eradicate the virus from the body.

“The fact that the infection is intrinsically incurable with retroviral therapy is as power-

ful an argument for prevention methods as we will ever find,” Robert Siliciano, an AIDS researcher at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, told the conference.

Piot said that by the time the next conference takes place in Bangkok in 2004, it will be easy to tell if governments have met their promises or not. “We will know who has delivered,” he said. “Bangkok will be a time of accountability.”

▶ www.aids2002.com



Promising start: the AIDS conference in Barcelona opened this week amid calls for government action.

Biology project left short of cash

David Cyranoski, Tokyo

Japan's partners in the Human Frontier Science Program (HFSP) — which supports international projects that take a multidisciplinary approach to problems in biology — have rebutted its plea for a firm commitment to more cash for the scheme.

At the programme's annual conference last month in Berlin, the partners, which include the United States and several European nations, declined to translate their support for HFSP projects into a formal agreement.

The HFSP was initiated by the Japanese government in 1989 to support biological research involving international teams, most of whose members work abroad on fellowships. Although it targets biological problems, recent emphasis has been placed on projects involving chemists, physicists, mathematicians and engineers.

But the HFSP has suffered as the dollar value of Japan's contribution, which accounts for more than half of its total funding, has declined with the yen. The United States and Italy, in particular, also fell far short of their

targets. As a result, the HFSP has only US\$50 million in funding this year against a \$60-million target agreed by the partners in 1997.

According to one representative at the meeting, US officials angered other members at the conference by insisting that the 1997 target was non-binding. Research-agency representatives at the meeting agreed that the programme needs \$30 million annually from outside Japan by 2004 — but failed to agree on how to divide this up.

“We could not reach an agreement on a framework that would make this compulsory,” says Takayuki Shirao, the HFSP's deputy secretary. The meeting did agree to expand support for young scientists and to try to ensure that jobs are open for HFSP participants when they return home.

Japanese officials expect the programme to continue, but are disappointed that the partners are unwilling to increase their stake in it. “Everyone praises the HFSP's significance,” says Shirao. “But even after 10 years, the HFSP's tragedy is weak financial support for such international projects.”