

Drug Addiction in Afghanistan: a Looming HIV/Aids Crisis

➤ *Worrying rates of Growth*

Drug addiction is on the rise in Afghanistan. A 2005 UN report estimated the **total number of opium and heroin users to almost 230,000**, (UNODC 2005). These figures are considered to be greatly conservative, as data collection in Afghanistan is arduous and there is a strong stigma associated to drug use, preventing users from being acknowledged and helped.

➤ *The HIV time bomb: injection related diseases also on the rise*

Together with drug use, injection related diseases are on the rise in Afghanistan. The explosion of an HIV/Aids and Hepatitis C pandemic would be disastrous for Afghanistan's crippled health care system. As the history of drug use and HIV infections in the region have shown that a growing drug abuse problem can rapidly escalate in an HIV pandemic. There is currently no data

➤ *Lessons from the Region: Drug Use and the HIV Pandemics*

The recent years have seen increasing levels of drug use in the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia and Iran. As a result of injection drug use HIV Aids infections escalated to a public health crisis.

- **Uzbekistan:** Intravenous drug use has increased almost 10 fold in Uzbekistan in the last ten years. **This has led to a 200 fold increase in HIV/Aids cases in the last five years.**
- **Tajikistan:** In the country HIV infection rates have increased of over 100 times, from 4 registered cases registered in 1999 to over 500 cases. **97% of the infected population in Tajikistan has contracted HIV through drug injection** (UNODC 2004)
- **Iran:** Iran has experienced a sharp rise in injection drug use, with a conservative estimate hitting the 200 000 injectors mark in 2003, and fear that the real figures are in the millions. In 1999 HIV infections were 0.01% of the population in Iran, an estimated 6,800 cases, **by 2005 infections had increased 10 fold to 66000 cases** (Global Health Facts 2005), 0.2% of global population, drug users making up the large majority of new infections.

If Afghanistan is to thwart the looming threat of HIV pandemics, treatment initiatives and a prevention campaign is urgently needed to help and advise drug users.

➤ *Stigma kills in Afghanistan, inadequate treatment facilities*

There is considerable stigma associated with drug use in Afghanistan. This prevents drug users, especially women and children, from receiving help and information. Significant steps have already been taken by the Afghan Ministry of Public Health and a number of international humanitarian organisations, and drug treatment centres are opening around the country. In order to prevent the further spread of drug use and HIV and Hepatitis C infection, the network of outreach facilities distributing clean needles and providing help and information to the most vulnerable communities needs to be strengthened. These measures are cost effective, reasonably easy to implement and can save many lives in a country already suffering from war and hunger.

The drug treatment initiative of the Italian Red Cross, the Afghan Red Crescent and the Senlis Council is a contribution to an effective prevention of yet another humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.