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Protests at AIDS 2012 Conference: Background Information and What to Expect

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Executive Summary: Like in previous International AIDS Conferences, the protests and demonstrations will play an important role in engaging civil society and stirring popular debate. Though the role that protestors and activists will play at the upcoming International AIDS Conference is still evolving—and will likely feature smaller, spontaneous demonstrations—information about scheduled demonstrations is available. Organizers are planning two separate events during the conference: a march and rally on Sunday, July 22, which will feature celebrities and speeches by prominent individuals; and a march on Tuesday, July 24, which encompasses five separate campaigns. Though the events are under separate leadership, the organizers of both events plan to collaborate and the movements share many of the same objectives: especially, increasing U.S. funding for HIV/AIDS initiatives. The demonstrations may differ from protests at previous conferences in several respects: higher participation; possibly increased influence from the “Occupy” movement; and likely a considerable emphasis on the domestic HIV/AIDS epidemic. Unlike previous conferences, when protest movements have been officially affiliated with conference organizers, this year’s planned protests are not recognized by the conference as affiliated independent event. A condition of affiliation is that protests not conflict with the conference schedule, and organizers have not accepted that condition.

Background: Demonstrations and activism have consistently played an integral role at International AIDS Conferences. Protests, marches, and rallies have provided an arena for engagement of civil society—with at times dramatic impact. For example, the protests at the 2000 conference in Durban, South Africa accelerated momentum to enhance treatment for HIV-infected populations. Unlike previous conferences, this year’s protest movement does not have any formal ties to the conference. AIDS 2012 does not recognize the marches and rallies as affiliated events; they take place during the conference schedule, and organizers have not accepted conditions of affiliation.

Demonstrators are planning two separate events to take place in D.C. during the conference: a march/rally on Sunday, July 22, and a march on Tuesday, July 24. The events are under separate leadership and involve a number of domestic and international AIDS advocacy organizations. The two movements initially considered collaborating but later decided to split into separate events. However, it is likely that attendees will participate and support both demonstrations. In addition to the planned

demonstrations, many spontaneous, smaller protests are likely to take place throughout the conference's sessions inside the conference center as well as at the Global Village.

This year also features two “conference hubs”—one in India focusing on sex workers’ rights, and another in Ukraine focusing on people who use drugs—which are sponsored by the International AIDS Conference. However, some organizations, most notably the “Human Rights and HIV/AIDS: Now More Than Ever” campaign, consider the hubs to be a part of the protest and boycott movement, and are criticizing the Obama administration for continued visa restrictions, which prevent certain individuals from attending the conference.

“Keep the Promise” march

Time and Location: Sunday, July 22 at 2 p.m. at Washington Monument; the event will start as a concert and rally, and participants will then march east along Constitution Avenue and end at 3rd Street (where Constitution and Pennsylvania Avenues converge)

The AIDS Healthcare Foundation, a patient advocacy group that has led a variety of protests at previous AIDS-related events, is the lead organizing sponsor of the “Keep the Promise” march at the Washington Monument, which will precede the conference’s Opening Session. Organizers predict the march will have large turnout; the website estimates that 10,000 people will attend the event and the march has received the support of almost 3,600 organizations and individuals, as of July 10. The event will likely conflict with the conference’s opening session, set to begin at 7 p.m.

Though AHF is spearheading the planning of the demonstration, other organizations are co-sponsors: Lifebeat, a non-profit organization that mobilizes the music industry to advocate for HIV/AIDS prevention; Washington Blade, a D.C. newspaper that focuses on LGBT issues; and IMPACT, an organization that focuses on economic empowerment, civic engagement, and political involvement. Additionally, the march has secured more than 1,300 partner organizations – including faith-based initiatives; local HIV outreach programs; and LGBT advocacy groups. The event will also feature prominent celebrities, including:

- A performance by Grammy award-winning musician **Wyclef Jean**;
- Keynote speeches by **Dr. Cornel West**, a prominent political philosopher at the Union Theological Seminary, and **Tavis Smiley**, a talk show host and author. West and Smiley have recently become active critics of the Obama administration, and participated in a nationally-televised discussion titled “Remaking America: From Poverty to Prosperity” about how to resolve national poverty;
- A speech from **Reverend Al Sharpton**, a civil rights leader. Sharpton will likely speak about the need for political and faith-based leadership in sustaining the fight against HIV/AIDS;
- A speech by **Andrew Young**, a former U.S. Congressman and Ambassador to the UN; and
- Actress and comedian **Margaret Cho** will host the rally.

A number of other prominent individuals have endorsed the movement. They include:

- **Archbishop Desmond Tutu**, who published a video encouraging support of the rally, and who is expected to address the crowd in a recorded video;
- Basketball legend **Earvin “Magic” Johnson, Jr.**, whose foundation (the Magic Johnson Foundation) has signed on to the “Keep the Promise” Declaration; and
- Broadway star **Blair Underwood**.

The **goals of the demonstration** and the [“Keep the Promise” Declaration](#) include:

- Fulfilling U.S. commitment to the President’s Emergency Program for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR);
- Containing the cost of HIV/AIDS care;
- Increased funding for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and
- Achieving universal access to HIV/AIDS treatment prevention through cost-effective measures, such as a scale-up of rapid HIV testing.

To achieve strong participation, organizers have established 26 groups (each with its own online forum), with a particular focus on certain states (the state groups currently include TX, CA, SC, OH, NJ, VA, FL, NY, and GA). The organizers recently initiated a significant effort to generate support and gain volunteers for the demonstration, including neighborhood canvassing and distribution of event materials. The march is also busing in many protesters.

AHF held a news conference July 9, during which the organization [criticized President Barack Obama](#) for not publicly stating whether or not he will appear at the International AIDS Conference. Planning for the march has been ongoing since AHF announced the protest at a news conference on July 26, 2011. Advertisements promoting the march have been displayed in D.C. and New York, mostly consisting of print advertisements at bus stops or on buses. March supporters have promoted the demonstration in a variety of outreach events across the country, including in Texas, New York City, D.C., and Baltimore. AHF has spearheaded rallies at previous International AIDS Conferences, though none seem to have been as comprehensive as this one. Additionally, AHF recently sponsored a “Keep the Promise” march in Kampala, Uganda, which drew more than 200 supporters carrying signs with messages such as “President Obama, Don’t Abandon Africa.”

The march will coincide with a display of the AIDS Memorial Quilt on the National Mall. Parts of The Quilt will be [on display](#) between 8th and 14th Streets on the National Mall July 21 – 25.

In addition, AHF’s [“Condom Nation” big rig](#) will conclude its U.S. tour at the march. The truck, which will have toured through 25 states and 40 cities by its arrival in Washington, D.C., plans to hand out 10 million free condoms and provide safe sex information. AHF will have two other exhibitions at the conference hall.

[“We Can End AIDS” March](#)

Time and Location: Tuesday, July 24 at 12 p.m.; Origin of each platform varies, but all will converge at Lafayette Square

The second movement is comprised of multiple marches that will converge in front of the White House in Lafayette Square. The march mainly focuses on economic justice and human rights, but is composed of [five sub-marches](#), which are:

- Fight Pharma’s Corporate Greed (largely led by HealthGAP and Public Citizen);
- Tax Wall Street (largely led by HealthGAP, VocalNY, and National Nurses United);
- Promote Sound Policies (largely led by Housing Works);
- End the War on Women (largely led by Women’s Collective); and
- Respect our Human Rights and Promote Harm Reduction (largely led by AIDS Foundation of Chicago).

The **demonstration’s** [demands](#) include:

- Treatment for 6 million people by 2013 from PEPFAR, and a global plan for the treatment of 15 million by 2015;
- A call for rich countries to provide a combination of at least \$10 billion per year for the Global Fund;
- Fully funding of the Ryan White Care Act, Medicare Expansion, HIV prevention programs, NIH and CDC budgets, and the HOPWA Housing programs;
- Protection and funding of harm reduction programs, sterile syringe access and treatment options to eliminate new infections among injection drug users by 2015;
- Drastic scale-up of anti-Tuberculosis programs to cut deaths of people living with HIV/AIDS from TB by 80% by 2015; and
- Full implementation of the Affordable Care Act.

As of the end of June, organizers had finalized plans to bus in approximately 40 buses of protesters. The various organizations sponsoring the demonstration are helping coordinate transportation from New York City, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Dallas. Additionally, organizers expect to receive support from conference attendees, as the start of the demonstration will take place during the conference’s lunch hour. Organizers also expect to receive support from members of Congress. The “Human Rights and Harm Reduction” platform plans to receive the active support of Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) and Rep. Jose Serrano (D-NY); other branches expect to receive Congressional support, as well.

Many of the branches will be active in the Global Village on Monday to publicize the march, and many of the demonstration’s branches will use the Global Village as a march “gathering center.” The marches’ exact routes do not appear final, but they will all end at the White House, where organizers have planned civil disobedience. The “Human Rights and Harm Reduction” march plans to stop at a Wells Fargo branch to protest the bank’s investment in the private prison industry.

Many of the organizations involved in the march, including Housing Works, Health GAP, and ACT UP, have been involved in protests at previous International AIDS Conference protests. This march appears to be similar to one of the demonstrations that took place at the 2010 Vienna Conference, when organizations including ACT UP, Health GAP, and Housing Works staged a “die-in” protest before the conference’s start. The Vienna protests largely focused on the Obama administration’s “broken promises,” a theme that will likely continue into this year’s demonstrations.

International Conference Hubs: Though both hubs have been characterized as “protests” and “boycotts” of the International AIDS Conference by some organizations, the AIDS 2012 secretariat has partnered with hub organizers to plan the events.

- **Eurasian Harm Reduction Network:** Located in Kiev, Ukraine, this pre-conference (which took place July 9-10) and post-conference (to take place Sept. 10) focuses on people who use drugs in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The conference will emphasize two issues:
 - Violation of human rights for people who use drugs; and
 - Lack of international and national funding for harm reduction and HIV services.
- **Sex Worker Freedom Festival:** Located in Kolkata, India, this conference hub will take place concurrently with the International AIDS Conference (July 21-27). The conference aims to provide an alternative event for sex workers and their allies “to protest [their] exclusion and ensure the voices of those excluded are heard in Washington,” according to a document provided on the AIDS 2012 website. The festival, which will be broadcast over video stream to the Global Village, will focus on several “freedoms,” including:
 - Freedom to access quality health services
 - Freedom to work and choose occupation; and
 - Freedom of movement and to migrate.

What to Expect: The upcoming protests may differ from previous demonstrations in a variety of ways:

- **No formal affiliation with AIDS 2012:** Unlike previous years, when the International AIDS Society listed protest movements as affiliated events of the conference, this year’s protest events have not received conference recognition.
- **High participation:** “Keep the Promise” march organizers expect their event may draw more than 10,000 participants, according to AHF press releases. If true, the rally’s participation would outnumber participation at many previous demonstrations. Attendance from celebrities may help increase attendance at the event. This year will also mark the first time that the **Global Village**, which came into creation at the 2004 meeting in Bangkok, will be featured at a U.S. conference. Because of its public nature, the Village has been a popular scene for many protests and demonstrations in the past. Because the conference does not recognize the protests as affiliated events, however, AIDS 2012 does not sanction protest activity originating in the Global Village. Prominent leaders of global health multilateral organizations have not yet publicly endorsed the marches—[as they have in the past](#)—though it is possible that they are working with the demonstrations’ organizers.

- **Possible new role played by “Occupy” movement:** Recent demonstrations about HIV/AIDS funding at “Occupy Wall Street” demonstrations are a sign that similar activities may take place at the conference. Protesters associated with the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power joined the Occupy Wall Street movement in late April advocating for the “Robin Hood Tax,” which would impose a small tax on each Wall Street trade to finance HIV/AIDS treatment and services. As part of [the demonstration](#), which attracted hundreds of participants, protesters dressed in Robin Hood costumes chained themselves to each other to block roads before being arrested. Other protesters, including those representing the Housing Works group, brought couches, chairs, and toilets onto Broadway. The same organizations will be active in upcoming protests, especially the “We Can End AIDS” march scheduled during the workday on July 24. It is unclear what impact the “Occupy” movement will have, or what form their demonstrations will assume.
- **Focused criticism of President Obama’s commitment to HIV/AIDS:** Criticism of the [Obama administration’s proposed FY 2013 \\$546 million funding cut](#) to the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) by segments of the HIV/AIDS advocacy community has persisted in recent months. Many advocates have started to question the genuineness of the Obama administration’s commitment to an AIDS-free generation, which President Obama [announced on World AIDS Day](#) Dec. 1, 2011. Criticism increased once news surfaced that the administration had a backlog of \$1.46 billion in unspent money marked toward HIV/AIDS programs due to reductions in the cost of treatment, inefficient bureaucracies, and a variety of other reasons.
- **Increased focus on HIV/AIDS prevalence in the U.S.:** Given the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the District of Columbia, activists have already mentioned that they hope to use the upcoming conference to highlight the District’s 2.7% HIV/AIDS prevalence rate—a higher rate than many countries currently receiving PEPFAR support. Combating the domestic HIV/AIDS epidemic is also one of the primary focuses of the AHF, the largest provider of HIV/AIDS medical care in the nation. Given that AIDS activists have run into several challenges in combating D.C.’s growing HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially stigma, activists say they hope the mere presence of the International AIDS Conference will reduce stigma and help draw resources and attention to domestic AIDS prevalence.

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