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## **Develop plans to prevent HIV transmission during natural disasters, churches told**

### **Press Release no. 8**

Plans for dealing with natural disasters must include measures to prevent the spread of HIV, a Church World Service (CWS) official said Thursday. Speaking at an event for representatives of faith-based organizations in Toronto prior to the start of the International AIDS Conference, Maurice A. Bloem, Regional Director for Church World Service in Indonesia and Timor Leste, urged HIV and AIDS project coordinators to prepare for how natural disasters will affect the people in their programs.

“If you’re serious about HIV you can’t say, ‘we don’t do it in our emergency response, we only do it in development,’” Bloem says. “Emergency is linked to development.”

Natural disasters can leave pockets of the population more vulnerable to HIV, says Bloem. The structures of society break down. People are living in circumstances with less privacy. Without resources, some may be more vulnerable to trading sex for money, food or shelter. Trauma and frustration may open doors to violence.

One of the largest factors is migration, long linked to increased risks of spreading HIV. Enormous mobility follows a disaster. When people are mobile, they establish new relationships, some of which are sexual. “If you don’t have the education, you are more at risk,” Bloem said.

In Aceh, Indonesia, following the December 2004 tsunami, CWS workers meeting with groups of women used sessions on reproductive health as an entry point for education about HIV and AIDS. Bloem says the next step would be to incorporate this education into CWS programs that reach groups of men.

Before the tsunami, CWS in Indonesia worked to educate staff, from directors to drivers, about HIV and AIDS. Organization officials asked their partners in HIV and AIDS initiatives to think about how disasters could affect the people they work with. Bloem recalls that partners in one AIDS project kept asking why CWS wanted to collaborate on disaster preparedness. Then in May 2006 an earthquake destroyed the homes of many of the project participants. “They quickly came to us to find out how we could work together,” Bloem said.

In Pakistan, field health workers working with rural women, primarily Afghan refugees, received training in HIV and AIDS education. After a strong earthquake hit in October 2005, health workers expanded their outreach to Pakistani women affected by the disaster. Packages of hygiene supplies provided by CWS after the quake included a pamphlet in Urdu about HIV and AIDS.

For Connie Cheung, who worked as recovery coordinator for CWS in Pakistan after the quake, these efforts to prevent the spread of HIV are part of the basic mandate of disaster response.

“The goal,” she said, “is really to save lives, in whatever way and form, and to prevent any further deterioration and harm.”

*By Marla Pierson Lester*