



*In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

**Message from**  
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**REGIONAL DIRECTOR**  
**WHO EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION**  
**on the occasion of**  
**WORLD AIDS DAY, 1 December 2007**

It is a pleasure to address you today on the important occasion of World AIDS Day.

I am pleased to convey to you the progress that has taken place in the response to HIV epidemic in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region over the last year. Most of our countries, including those under difficult conditions, have introduced voluntary HIV counselling and testing services. In addition, antiretroviral therapy has been introduced in all countries except two: Afghanistan, which is preparing to start the therapy in the near future, and Iraq, due to its critical situation.

This has been achieved as a result of the commitment of countries, the efforts of WHO and its partners, the financial support provided in the context of the 3 by 5 and Universal Access initiatives, and the success in obtaining funds from other sources.

Despite these very real achievements, the estimated number of people living with HIV/AIDS in the Region has reached 670 000. This includes the 100 000 new infections that occurred in 2006. Also, while the number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy is increasing, and almost all patients who are known to need treatment are receiving it, there are still many more HIV-infected people in our countries who do not know their HIV status and therefore do not access treatment and care. This shows that we need to make greater efforts to help people to undergo an HIV test. This HIV test must be strictly voluntary and confidential and should be accompanied by professional counselling. As long as HIV-infected people fear rejection by families, friends, communities and health workers, many will not have the

courage to learn their HIV status through an HIV test. Let us all contribute to changing this situation in our own environment by improving our knowledge about what HIV is, how it is transmitted, and how it can be prevented and treated.

We are moving in the right direction, but we need to move with greater determination, commitment and leadership. This is the basis of this year's World AIDS Day campaign theme, which is 'leadership'. Leadership exists not only at the political level, but also within families, communities, and places of worship and work. Each one of us can play a part in the response to HIV/AIDS.

Here, I need to refer to the important role civil society can play in the response to HIV/AIDS. In particular, nongovernmental organizations have the flexibility to reach those vulnerable and most at-risk population groups that may not be accessible to governmental bodies. Good coordination between these organizations and the governmental sector is crucial to greater success in the response to the epidemic.

People living with HIV/AIDS are also central to an effective response to the epidemic and through their active participation can greatly enhance HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and care programmes. Addressing the stigma and discrimination that still surround HIV/AIDS remains an urgent task.

If all of us play our different roles effectively, then together we can succeed in achieving our goal of universal access to prevention, treatment and care.

Thank you.