

# Religious leaders assess UN AIDS declaration

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New York, June 13 (ENInews)--Religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations are giving generally high marks to a United Nations AIDS meeting that set new targets to combat the continued spread of HIV/AIDS.

At the 8-10 June meeting at the U.N. in New York, marked by frequent references to the three decades in which acquired immune deficiency syndrome has claimed more than 30 million lives, U.N. member states agreed on a final document which called for strengthening measurable targets to fight HIV/AIDS.

This includes universal access to treatment by the year 2015 for the prevention of the spread of HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), as well as support, care and treatment for those dealing with HIV infection. Among the goals are, by 2015, reducing by half the rate of HIV infection among those injecting drugs.

The final document, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly, also contained the most specific language yet in a U.N. document about the need for the use of condoms to reduce the spread of HIV. That language was opposed by the Vatican and a number of predominantly Muslim countries.

J.P. Mokgethi-Heath, acting executive director of the South Africa-based International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or Personally Affected by HIV and AIDS (INERELA+), praised much of the document though he said he was concerned that the final document's "action plan" did not contain specific enough language about those most affected by HIV, including sex workers, men who have sex with men and intravenous drug users.

In an interview with ENInews on the final day of the meeting, the Rev. Lisandro Orlov, of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Argentina based in Buenos Aires, said the best way to look at the document was as a "work in progress." He said he

was returning to Argentina "an optimist."

"We need to be positive," Orlov said, praising the fact that conservative forces "did not erase the spirit of previous declarations."

In a statement, Peter Prove, executive director of the Geneva-based Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, said his organization appreciated "that the declaration reaffirms the centrality of human rights in the AIDS response, and focuses on enabling legal, social and policy frameworks for the elimination of stigma, discrimination, and violence. Human rights obligations, especially the principle of non-discrimination, reflect fundamental faith principles concerning respect for human dignity."

At the same time, Prove said, "despite recognizing the disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS on women, the political declaration sets no specific prevention, treatment, and care targets for women and girls."