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00:01 CET, TUESDAY, 13 JULY 2010**

Three Former Latin American Presidents Sign Vienna Declaration, Join Global Call to Action for Science-Based Drug Policy Reform

Former Leaders Urge Alternatives to “War on Drugs” in Lead Up to XVIII International AIDS Conference

13 July 2010 [Vienna, Austria] – Former presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazil), Ernesto Zedillo (México) and César Gaviria (Colombia) today announced their endorsement of the Vienna Declaration, the official declaration of the XVIII International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2010, www.aids2010.org) taking place from 18 to 23 July 2010.

The Vienna Declaration (www.viennadeclaration.com) seeks to improve community health and safety by calling for the incorporation of scientific evidence into illicit drug policies. The declaration was opened for endorsement by academics and members of the public on 28 June 2010.

“The war on drugs has failed,” said Fernando Henrique Cardoso. “In Latin America, the only outcome of prohibition is to shift areas of cultivation and drug cartels from one country to another, with no reduction in the violence and corruption generated by the drug trade.”

Authored by an international group of distinguished scientists and experts, the Vienna Declaration highlights the ways that over reliance on drug law enforcement results in a range of health and social harms including growing HIV rates among people who use drugs.

The three former heads of state are the co-presidents of the influential Latin American Commission on Drugs and Democracy, which strives to inform drug policy in the region and to contribute towards more effective, safe and humane drug policies. Joining them in supporting the Vienna Declaration are three other influential Latin American figures – Peruvian writer, journalist and essayist Mario Vargas Llosa, Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho and Sergio Ramírez Mercado, writer and former vice-president of Nicaragua.

“The war on drugs has had such an incredibly negative impact on Latin America, and the fact that the Vienna Declaration is receiving this level of endorsement from former heads of state should serve as an example to those currently in power,” said AIDS 2010 Chair Dr. Julio Montaner, President of the International AIDS Society (IAS) and Director of the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE). “I hope that the Vienna Declaration will inspire many more political leaders to cast aside the drug war rhetoric and embrace evidence-based policies that can meaningfully improve community health and safety.”

The Vienna Declaration calls on governments and international organizations, including the United Nations, to take a number of steps, including:

- undertaking a transparent review of the effectiveness of current drug policies
- implementing and evaluating a science-based public health approach to address the harms stemming from illicit drug use
- scaling up evidence-based drug dependence treatment options
- abolishing ineffective compulsory drug treatment centres that violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- endorsing and scaling up funding for the drug treatment and harm reduction measures endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations

The Vienna Declaration lists a range of harms stemming from the war on drugs, and notes that the criminalization of people who use drugs has resulted in record high incarceration rates, thereby placing a massive burden on taxpayers.

“Instead of sticking to failed policies with disastrous consequences, we must direct our efforts to the reduction of consumption and the reduction of the harm caused by drugs to people and society,” said Cardoso. “Repressive policies are firmly rooted in prejudices, fears and ideological visions. The way forward to safeguard human rights, security and health is a strategy of peace not war.”

Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, injecting drug use accounts for approximately one in three new cases of HIV. In some areas of rapid HIV spread, such as in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, injecting drug use is the primary cause of new HIV infections. Legal barriers to scientifically proven prevention services such as needle and syringe programs and opioid substitution therapy (OST) mean hundreds of thousands of people become infected with HIV and Hepatitis C every year. The effectiveness of these programs is well-documented, though access to such interventions is often limited in those locations where HIV is spreading most rapidly. According to various scientific reviews conducted by the World Health Organization, the Institute of Medicine (U.S.) and others, these programs reduce HIV rates without increasing drug use.

“We welcome the support of Presidents Cardoso, Zedillo and Gaviria, as well as the many doctors, scientists, researchers and public figures who have already put their support and endorsement behind the Vienna Declaration,” said Dr. Evan Wood, founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy (ICSDP) and the Chair of the Vienna Declaration Writing Committee. “This level of support, especially before the conference has started, demonstrates the urgency that global leaders in many disciplines believe we must move towards reforming drug policies.”

As an estimated 20,000 conference participants travel to Vienna this week, conference organizers are encouraging them to join the growing call for evidence-based drug policies.

“The approach to drug policy proposed in the Vienna Declaration will prevent new HIV infections and ensure that people who struggle with addiction have access to the medical and support services they need,” said Dr. Brigitte Schmied, AIDS 2010 Local Co-Chair and President of the Austrian AIDS Society. “Access to proven interventions and to the highest standard of health are rights that each of us values, including those living with addiction.”

The Vienna Declaration was initiated by the IAS, the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy, and the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS based in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

Those wishing to sign on may visit www.viennadeclaration.com, where the full text of the declaration, along with the list of authors, is available. The two-page declaration references 28 reports, describing the scientific evidence documenting the effectiveness of public health

approaches to drug policy and the negative consequences of approaches that criminalize drug users.

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About AIDS 2010

The XVIII International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2010) is the biennial meeting of researchers, implementers and diverse leaders involved in the global response to HIV. It is convened by the IAS in partnership with international, regional and local partners. Visit www.aids2010.org for more information and to register for the conference, which is taking place from 18 to 23 July 2010 in Vienna, Austria.

International AIDS Society

The International AIDS Society is the world's leading independent association of HIV professionals, with 14,000 members from 190 countries working at all levels of the global response to AIDS. Our members include researchers from all disciplines, clinicians, public health and community practitioners on the frontlines of the epidemic, as well as policy and program planners.

International Centre for Science in Drug Policy

ICSDP aims to be a primary source for rigorous scientific evidence on illicit drug policy in order to benefit policymakers, law enforcement, and affected communities. To this end, the ICSDP conducts original scientific research in the form of systematic reviews, evidence-based drug policy guidelines, and research collaborations with leading scientists and institutions across diverse continents and disciplines.

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS

The BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE) is Canada's largest HIV/AIDS research, treatment and education facility. The BC-CfE is based at St Paul's Hospital, Providence Health Care, a teaching hospital of the University of British Columbia. The BC-CfE is dedicated to improving the health of British Columbians with HIV through developing, monitoring and disseminating comprehensive research and treatment programs for HIV and related diseases.

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