

Faith leaders take HIV prevention message to African sports tournament

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By Fredrick Nzwili, ENInews

Nairobi, Kenya--Faith leaders are taking HIV and AIDS prevention messages to Africa's largest multi-sports tournament, currently underway in Maputo, Mozambique.

With drums beating, vuvuzelas and horns blowing, thousands are entering stadiums to cheer the nearly 5,000 athletes competing at the 10th All Africa Games, but the leaders are warning of increased vulnerability to HIV infections during the games that run from 3 to 18 September.

"We are advocating through the IEC (Information Education Communication) materials that we have available," said Pastor Jeremias Langa, the Mozambican national coordinator of International Network of Religious Leaders Living with or personally affected by HIV and Aids (INERELA+). He said more efforts were being put to deliver the messages to the youth as well as religious congregations and people working with persons living with HIV/AIDS in the city.

"I believe that sport can play a crucial role in turning back HIV," said Langa whose interfaith network brings together both lay and ordained, women and men. The network founded in Africa in 2002 is based in Johannesburg, South Africa. It has recently expanded into Europe, the Americas and Asia-Pacific.

The games are crucial to raising awareness about efforts to reach zero new infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths, said Michel Sidibe, Executive Director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

"Reducing the numbers of new HIV infections is nowhere more imperative or urgent than in Africa," said Sidibe in a news release on 2 September while launching, "Give AIDS the Red Card," the organization's anti-HIV campaign. He unveiled the campaign with Pedrito Caetano, the Mozambican Minister of Youth and Sports.

"Sport brings people together and is especially popular among young people. I urge all the participants and fans across Africa watching the All-Africa Games to learn the facts about HIV prevention," said Caetano.

Heads of national delegations to the games, including National Olympic Committees presidents and ministers of sport from 47 participating countries signed to support the campaign. It started at the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa with support from 28 team

captains. At the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup in Germany, six team captains endorsed the campaign.

Sports is an avenue the churches have considered using to educate people about safe sexual practices, access to treatment, voluntary counseling and testing and empowerment, said Pauline Njiru, the Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiative in Africa regional coordinator for Eastern Africa in an interview in Nairobi.

"The Church can accompany their nationals (to the sports events) and relay these messages," said Njiru on 6 September. Her organization, a project of the World Council of Churches, has the goal of building an "HIV-competent church."

"If the church is competent, they should (be at the sports events). This would also be a commitment to fighting the scourge and a deliberate move to journey with their flock," she said.

Sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 22.5 million people living with the virus, is the most affected region globally, according to UNAIDS. However, HIV infection rates in the region have declined by more than 25 per cent between 2001 and 2009 in 22 countries, the U.N. body said.

[Editors note: Canon Gideon, a Ugandan Anglican cleric, helped to found the International Network of Religious Leaders living with, or affected by, HIV and AIDS (INERELA). He was the first African religious leader to publicly announce that he was HIV positive. Ever since then, Canon Gideon has worked to raise awareness of HIV, and fight the stigma so often related to it.]