UN conference on AIDS settles on compromise statement

Janice Hopkins Tanne *New York*

Last week's UN high level meeting on AIDS in New York agreed on a declaration of commitment that was stronger than some countries would have liked but weaker than what non-governmental and pressure groups wanted. Nevertheless, it goes further than the previous declaration of 2001.

The secretary general of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, said that the HIV and AIDS epidemic "has become the greatest challenge of our generation ... the epidemic continues to outpace us."

He said, "Last year, globally, there were more new infections than ever before, and more people died than ever before. There were more women and girls living with HIV/AIDS than ever before ... If we don't step up the fight dramatically, we will not reach the millennium development goal of halting, and beginning to reverse, the spread of HIV and AIDS by 2015."

The declaration recognised HIV and AIDS as a global socio-

economic problem as well as a medical and public health problem. It said the disease is becoming feminised. Nearly 39 million people are infected with HIV; and now almost half of them are women, who are vulnerable to infection because of violence and lack of power in relationships.

The declaration is a political statement, not a plan of action. The meeting agreed that every year \$23bn (£12.2bn; €17.7bn) would be needed to tackle the epidemic by 2010, an increase from previous projections. An interim meeting in 2008 will review progress.

The three day session at the UN headquarters aimed to evaluate progress made since the UN's 2001 declaration of commitment to HIV and AIDS—many targets of which have not been met—and to spell out a plan for the years ahead. For the first time representatives of more than 800 non-governmental organisations and pressure groups participated in the meet-

ings, as well as representatives of more than 140 of the UN's 191 member states.

The secretary general said that most countries had failed to meet important goals from 2001. For instance, they had not provided education to young people so they could protect themselves, and they had not

taken measures to fight the spread of AIDS among women and girls.

Increasingly HIV and AIDS affect women, said Mary Robinson, former UN high commissioner for human rights.

The draft declaration is at www.un.org/ga/aidsmeeting2006

UN secretary general Kofi Annan said: "The epidemic continues to outpace us. Last year more people died [of AIDS] than ever before"

Ban on smoking in public places "disproportionate to the problem"

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

New legislation that bans smoking in public places in England, which is due to reach the final stages of voting in the House of Lords later this month, is unjustified and an over-reaction to the scientific evidence on passive smoking, says a House of Lords report.

The impact of passive smoking in public places is a relatively minor problem compared with passive smoking in the home, says the House of Lords' economic affairs committee. It concludes, "Failure to consider these

matters properly has resulted in the introduction of a policy that appears to demonstrate a disproportionate response to the problem."

The committee conducted an inquiry into government policy on the management of risk after a speech by the prime minister, Tony Blair, in May 2005, in which he suggested that British society was becoming increasingly risk averse. The attitude towards risk, which Mr Blair claimed was leading to a compensation culture and an unbal-

anced view of activities such as school trips and leisure facilities, was putting pressure on policy makers to "eliminate risk in a way that is out of all proportion to the potential damage," he said.

But the inquiry found no evidence that society was becoming more risk averse. In fact, the committee questioned whether it was possible to measure risk aversion to back up the view that has been proposed by the government.

In its report, the committee argues that threats to liberty are not adequately considered when new policies are developed. It calls for a more formal procedure to ensure that the potential impact of legislation on personal

freedoms is properly thought out.

Although the government has a framework for assessing the risk, there are problems with how it is applied. The reward and assessment systems in the public sector may emphasise the adverse impact of failure rather than the gains from success, so encouraging excessive risk aversion, says the report.

The committee looked at two specific cases, the legislation to ban smoking in public places and the levels of expenditure on rail and road safety.

The report, *Government Policy on the Management of Risk*, is available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld/ldconaf.htm.