

The Launch of the Global Campaign on Children and AIDS in Iran

TEHRAN, Iran, 5 December 2005 – Past and present football stars joined TV celebrities to kick off the UNITE FOR CHILDREN UNITE AGAINST AIDS campaign in Iran last week at a special World AIDS Day football match.

The game between the Iranian Celebrity Football team and Ararat Football Club was watched by more than a thousand people from schools and NGOs, people living with AIDS, officials and UNICEF partners at Tehran's Ararat football stadium.

Wearing red and blue banners around their necks as a symbol of the Global Campaign and holding posters and banners with the UNITE for CHILDREN, UNITE against AIDS message, hundreds of school girls screamed "We love you Ali Daie" at the tops of their voices, when one of Iran's most famous footballers appeared on the pitch. The occasion was all the more special because it marked the first time girls were allowed into a stadium alongside boys to watch a football game.

Celebrities from Iranian film and TV, and sporting personalities, including Hadi Sai, Iran's Taekwondo champion and Mahtab Keramati, a famous TV and film actress, gave speeches to the crowd, outlining the aims of the Campaign and asking the spectators to show their support. They talked about the problem of stigma and the fact that most children in Iran are ignorant of the virus and how it is spread.

An impromptu speech was given by Mohammad Hassan Dorri, a cleric. He told the crowd that Islam also has a role in combating the spread of HIV AIDS in Iran. He announced that he will spread information to millions of youngsters who belong to the Basij – volunteer Islamic groups.

All the spectators were given red and blue bracelets, the colours of the campaign, which were handmade by NGOs in Tehran.

Prevalence of HIV/AIDS is low in Iran with most of the infected cases being amongst injecting drug users and prisoners. Official statistics, however, like most countries in the

world are acknowledged to be wildly inaccurate. Owing to the stigma attached to the disease and the cultural reticence in speaking openly about sexual relations, it is clear what is missing in Iran is information.

“Research has shown that in Iran young people know very little about HIV/AIDS,” said Rima Salah, UNICEF’s deputy Executive Director, who was in Iran to launch the Campaign. “They lack the information needed to arm themselves against the spread of the virus. Ignorance makes each young Iranian more vulnerable to the disease.”

The Global Campaign in Iran intends to focus primarily on 2 main areas – firstly Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT) and the Prevention of infection amongst adolescents and young people. This will involve supporting activities such as school-based and community-based life skills, youth friendly health centers, peer educators and communication materials and media.

The event ended with a laser show, which revealed across the football pitch in fluorescent green the messages and logos of UNICEF and the Global Campaign.

Earlier in the day, Rima Salah spoke at a seminar held by Iran’s Ministry of Health to commemorate World Aids day. She reminded the audience of the Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS made by 189 countries, including Iran, at the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001. The Declaration set out specific commitments leaders would work to fulfill upon their return home – including prevention campaigns, reducing stigma, building health infrastructures, providing necessary resources, and ensuring treatment, care and respect for people living with HIV and AIDS.

At the seminar, Iran’s Minister of Health, Dr Kamran Lankarani praised the measures taken by Iran to prevent the spread of AIDS. “While the Islamic Republic of Iran was committed to maintain the nation’s health and implement the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) in 2001,” said Lankarani, “we hope that by 2015, Iran will move closer to realising the sixth MDG and bring the epidemic under full control.”

To coincide with World AIDS Day and the launch of UNITE FOR CHILDREN UNITE AGAINST AIDS, UNICEF in Iran has supported the publication of the Handbook for Parliamentarians and the Handbook for Religious Leaders. Both have been adapted to suit Iran's situation and needs and translated into Farsi.

For more information regarding the Global Campaign on Children and AIDS in Iran, please go to <http://www.unicef.org/iran>