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In the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic, HIV Positive Migrant Workers, Refugees and their Families are in Dire Need of Accessible and Resilient Health Services

CARAM Asia Statement On World AIDS Day 2020

On the occasion of 1st December - World AIDS Day (WAD), a day of worldwide solidarity to unit in the fight against HIV & AIDS, CARAM Asia with its 42 member organizations in 18 countries across Asia urges all governments to urgently provide protection mechanisms for migrant workers and refugees to uphold their health rights, enhance their access to health services, and recognize their vulnerability to HIV & AIDS.

Migrant workers, refugees, their family members and other mobile persons have been hit hard not only by the economic impact of COVID-19 but also by increased stigma and discrimination across the Asian region. Government imposed movement control orders aimed at controlling the pandemic led to massive numbers of migrant workers losing their jobs and being forced to return home. The impact of the pandemic on migrants has been devastating. Beyond economic impacts, migrants have also faced blame for spreading the virus across borders due to their mobility, without proper consideration that they are vulnerable to infection and were forced home. In this situation, HIV prevention, testing, treatment and care services are all being disrupted particularly in relation to migrant workers, in both sending and receiving countries. In many cases, HIV positive migrants who returned home were unable to travel and reach health services to ensure continuation of treatment due to lockdown and movement control orders. Due to the tumult of returning migrants and fear of COVID-19, there was no HIV screening or service referral for returned migrants. Returned migrants lacked guidance on accessing health screening beyond coronavirus related testing, and there was a clear lack of systems to ensure

continuation of ART. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) the breakdown in essential HIV services due to COVID-19 is now threatening lives. Any slowing down in provision of these services will leave many vulnerable populations at greater risk of HIV infection and AIDS-related deaths, in addition to COVID-19 and other diseases resurgent under these circumstances.

WHO states that the world has made significant progress on the HIV epidemic since the late 1990s, but HIV remains a major global public health issue. Like many other major health issues, the HIV response faces additional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Likewise, the continued marginalization of migrant workers and refugees through discriminatory health policies is worsening the situation. The COVID-19 crisis can be seen as an opportunity for governments and other stakeholders to reflect on the reality of HIV and other health challenges faced by migrant workers and refugees, and find humane and equitable solutions.

Migrant workers are already very vulnerable, in part because they are considered “essential workers” due to the jobs they fill and their contribution towards the economies of both sending and receiving countries. Accordingly, as essential members of society, migrants’ human and health rights must be fulfilled. The occasion of World AIDS Day this year needs to be used as an opportunity to reflect on and address the inequalities migrants face in accessing health services generally, and the gaps in HIV treatment, prevention and care available for migrants specifically.

To end AIDS by 2030, CARAM Asia recommends that:

- Migrant workers must be recognized as an at-risk, affected and vulnerable population and be included into national HIV strategic plans as an HIV key population.
- Completely eliminate all mandatory HIV testing of migrant workers as criteria for employment. Host countries must halt deportation/ repatriation of HIV positive migrant workers and allow them to stay at work and provide them with necessary referral to services and treatment.
- Review and repeal punitive laws and policies that criminalize homosexuality, and/or discriminate against MSM or PLHIV migrant workers.
- All countries should work to eliminate stigma and discrimination of HIV positive people and respect gender and sexual orientation among migrant workers.
- Both sending and receiving countries which are engaged in labour migration should

invest sufficient funds into HIV education for migrant workers' communities, especially for male migrant workers, to provide awareness of HIV all along the migration continuum - from contemplating migration, to pre-departure, on-site and reintegration.

- Increase migrants' access to public health services by increasing accessibility to health insurance, eliminating discrimination in the form of high costs compared to nationals, and by reforming policies which restrict access to health services in the form of limitations on mobility and arrest of undocumented migrants.

CARAM Asia (Coordination of Action Research on AIDS and Mobility) is a regional network of 42 organizations in 18 countries across Asia and has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

The statement issued by: CARAM Asia Task Force on Migration Health and HIV (MHH)