

Banking on Religion to Prevent HIV/AIDS

Religious festivities are opportunities for HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns in remote regions of the People's Republic of China

By Jennifer Francis and Abby Tan

IN REMOTE, POVERTY-STRICKEN regions of the People's Republic of China (PRC), strong adherence to religion has proven to be a boon to civil society groups that are trying to spread the word on HIV/AIDS prevention.

The China Association of Ethnic Economy (CAEE), the umbrella nongovernment organization (NGO) tapped by ADB to spearhead the NGO Initiatives to Prevent HIV/AIDS project, reports that religious festivals and national holidays are very important social events in the lives of the Tibetan, Mongolian, and Qiang ethnic minorities who inhabit hard-to-reach project areas—high altitude (3,600 meters up) areas of Gansu and Qinghai provinces in northwest PRC.

The ethnic groups are mainly Buddhists and Muslims. They will travel for miles, on foot or on horseback, to take part in these festivities. CAEE's first progress report says one religious gathering in July 2007 in Qinghai attracted over 100,000 people.

These sorts of gatherings provide the best opportunities for CAEE and its two partner community-based organizations to mount posters and distribute information and education materials on the dangers of HIV infections and AIDS. Person-to-person discussions about HIV/AIDS also take place during those gatherings.

These activities have the cooperation of religious and community leaders who eagerly endorsed them after the CAEE conducted train-

ing and information seminars on the impending explosion of HIV/AIDS.

While HIV/AIDS has not yet reached epidemic proportions in these provinces, there is a danger of increasing HIV/AIDS incidences with the rise of drug use and unhygienic blood transfusions, in addition to the fact that ethnic youths are traveling more frequently to big cities like Lanzhou and Ningxia to sell their cattle and poultry and are patronizing sex workers while in cities.

The CAEE's initiatives include building up local communities' knowledge and awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention and control; preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS from high-risk groups to the general public; and reducing stigma and discrimination against those afflicted by the disease.

The CAEE proposes three directions to achieve these goals: an information and education campaign (IEC), community-participated capacity building, and behavior intervention.

The IEC activities will include development of materials like posters and brochures in the Tibetan and Mongolian languages, as well as in Mandarin, the national language. The IEC activities for both high-risk groups and general public are held in schools, prisons, or hotels, and, of course, during large religious festivals. CAEE has engaged former drug-users as peer educators in carrying out awareness raising activities in the communities. The CAEE will advertise their activities as well in the local media.

Community participation and capacity building will include lectures to raise awareness, small-



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scale themed performances with messages such as "Say No to Drugs and HIV/AIDS" and "Women and HIV/AIDS," and importantly, recruiting local women's groups to be trained as peer educators.

Behavior intervention will include pilot condom distribution, and care for those living with HIV/AIDS. But CAEE notes that condom distribution will be stepped up only in a later phase of the project as the incidence of HIV infections in the project areas are very low, or almost nonexistent, at the moment. ■

Conquering HIV Stigma and Discrimination

AS AN IMPLEMENTER of the NGO Initiatives to Prevent HIV/AIDS project, Yang Yong has visited the Maqu grasslands in the PRC a number of times. His friend, the monk Zhaxi Lama, would always refer to him as the "Mamba" (doctor in Tibetan) despite Yang's insistence he is a social worker and not a medical doctor.

Since Yang always talks about health issues, the honorific title allowed him to easily educate the herdsmen and monks in Maqu about the links of sex and drugs to HIV/AIDS.

Yang learned from the monk that leprosy patients were once discriminated against and cast out of the villages. The villagers then thought that leprosy was contagious. When the herdsmen learned that it was curable, discrimination against those afflicted lessened.

The monk Zhaxi Lama realized that HIV/AIDS is also preventable and therefore carriers should not be ostracized. Although there are

no cases of HIV/AIDS infection in Maqu yet, the Lama believes that the community should not be any less vigilant. He noted that young herdsmen visit the big cities of Lanzhou and Ningxia in autumn once they earn from the sale of their cattle and sheep, and they are therefore at risk of contacting HIV/AIDS from prostitutes.

Information about HIV/AIDS had begun to spread among the herdsmen and monks. Zhaxi Lama told Yang he wanted his fellow lamas to help educate the people to "cherish life, stay away from drugs" and prevent HIV/AIDS. Such information and education campaigns seemed to be yielding results, says the China Association of Ethnic Economy (CAEE), the NGO spearheading the initiatives. The CAEE believes that an intensified campaign would improve the people's awareness on HIV/AIDS prevention, and therefore induce them to take action against it. ■