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PRESS RELEASE

Marking a decade of free antiretroviral treatment (ART) in India

Celebrating the transformative commitment of the Government of India to no-cost AIDS drugs

New Delhi: More than 300 stakeholders from government, affected communities, media, international agencies, and civil society came together today to mark the completion of 10 years of free antiretroviral treatment (ART) in India. The event – **Treatment@10** – was organised by the National Coalition of People Living with HIV in India (NCPI+), in collaboration with the Department of AIDS Control, India HIV/AIDS Alliance, PHFI, UNAIDS, USAID and UNDP, to celebrate the ten-year journey that has transformed the lives of people living with HIV (PLHIV) and their families.

The first HIV case in India was detected in 1986. An estimated 2.1 million Indians are now living with the virus. The first effective ART regimens were announced in 1996. Even as the medicines became available in India, they remained unaffordable to most people who needed them. People sold their property and assets to buy the drugs, but few could afford life-long treatment. Mona Balani a woman living with HIV recalls, “Back in 2002, we were either thrown out or denied treatment at government and private hospitals, and we got no support from our families.”

On 1 April 2004, in response to years of advocacy by PLHIV leaders like Ashok Pillai and Rajeshwari, the Government of India began a free ART programme at eight centres in six high-prevalence states that has now grown to a network of 1,251 ART and Link ART centres across India. Today, free ART is accessed by over 768,000 PLHIV at these centres.

Kanjibhai B Gadhia, a farmer from Amreli district of Gujarat who has been on ART for the past 10 years says, “ARV is my partner for life and I can never give it up.” His story resonates with the almost eight lakh PLHIV on treatment in India. This 10-year milestone has been made possible by the joint efforts of India’s committed PLHIV community, the Department of AIDS Control, bilateral & multilateral donors, and many civil society stakeholders at every level.

While reflecting on progress, the Treatment@10 conference also deliberated on the urgent need to define a clear roadmap to ensure further necessary scale-up of treatment, care & support services for PLHIV in India based on the model of partnership that has defined India’s ambitious and innovative model.

Manoj Pardesi, General Secretary, NCPI+, reminded participants, “While the past decade has seen commendable strides in accessibility to AIDS treatment in India, there is still a long way to go. Many people living with the virus are yet to be enrolled in HIV care. PLHIV need routine and uninterrupted

access to CD4 testing to ensure timely initiation of ART and regular monitoring. There is an urgent need to scale up viral load testing, enhance accessibility to second- and third-line treatment regimens, and increase availability of pediatric formulations. We're committed working with the Department of AIDS Control and other stakeholders to put 10 lakhs PLHIV on treatment by the end of 2015."

Sonal Mehta, Director of Programmes, India HIV/AIDS Alliance, added, "Discrimination and stigma continue to be a daily part of the lives of too many PLHIV. India's treatment programme is an example to the world of what can be achieved through committed collaboration. We have learned much in the past decade, and we need to continue to build on this strong foundation. Free ART, coupled with the care & support services provided through the growing network of Vihaan centres, will ensure the vitality and good health of India's PLHIV community and their families for years to come."

About India HIV/AIDS Alliance:

India HIV/AIDS Alliance (Alliance India) is a diverse partnership that brings together committed organisations and communities to support a sustained response to HIV in India. Complementing the national programme in India, we work through capacity building, knowledge sharing, technical support and advocacy. Through our network of partners, Alliance India supports the delivery of effective, innovative, community-based HIV programmes to key groups affected by the epidemic.

About Vihaan:

Vihaan is a national initiative to establish 350 Care & Support Centres (CSCs) across India to provide expanded access to key services, increase treatment adherence, reduce stigma and discrimination, and improve the quality of life of people living with HIV (PLHIV). The programme is designed as the care & support component of the country's HIV response under National AIDS Control Programme IV (NACP IV).

Working in close collaboration with the Department of AIDS Control and with support from the Global Fund, the programme operates in 31 states and territories and will reach more than one million PLHIV by 2016. The Vihaan consortium is led by India HIV/AIDS Alliance and 17 state-level PLHIV networks and NGOs, which in turn partner with district-level PLHIV networks and other organisations to deliver care & support services in communities.

About NCPI+

The National Coalition of People Living with HIV in India (NCPI+) is a national representative body of, for and by people living with HIV (PLHIV). NCPI+ aims to increase the active, transparent and constructive participation of PLHIV and health activists to strengthen care, support and treatment across the country; and improve the quality of life of individuals and families affected by HIV. NCPI+ serves to represent the needs of PLHIV networks and key population CBOs and works with activists to join together to speak with a clear voice, strengthen advocacy, and improve the health and quality of life of PLHIV in India.

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