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HIV is not in recession: TAC and other PWA activists demonstrate peacefully at the IV Southern African AIDS Conference

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On Thursday 2 April, TAC activists together with many other HIV activists held a protest at the 4th Southern African AIDS Conference in Durban. The focus of the protest was 'HIV is not in recession!', timed to coincide with the G20 meeting in London and the focus of world leaders on costing a multi-trillion dollar bailout to stabilise the global economy.

As activists peacefully toyi-toyi'd from the people living with HIV gathering room, security guards began to amass. By the time protesters had walked downed the stairs, they were surrounded by a human chain of guards. As activists sang protest songs and held posters stating 'Bail out health care', and 'No more ARV waiting lists', security guards began to push activists outside. One of the security leaders instructed Victor Lakay, TAC's head of Community Health Advocacy and one of the members of the conference's organising committee, to disperse the protest or face expulsion from the conference hall immediately. Activists had their badges snatched from around their necks as the protest continued.

Dr. Linda-Gail Bekker, chairperson of the conference, has long strived for access to quality healthcare for people living with HIV and AIDS. She has ensured that an unprecedented number of HIV activists are present at the conference. The protest was not directed at Bekker or at the conference organising committee, but aimed at highlighting pressing issues at this conference with the theme of "Scaling up for success". The protest focused on financial resourcing in the scaling up of health care service delivery. The Department of Health has admitted that the budget allocation for ARVs through the current HIV/AIDS conditional grant to provinces is at least R1 billion short of the amount initially budgeted to treat the targeted 220,000 people this year. Unless the NSP is properly financed, government will fail to meet its targets and people will continue from AIDS to die due to their inability to gain access to ARVs.

The fact that a protest by PWAs at the AIDS Conference was immediately curtailed, and that activists were instructed to disperse or face expulsion from the conference venue, relates a dire message about the leadership by PWAs at these conferences. HIV activists are poorly represented in the speaking sessions at this conference, and are excluded from most of the plenaries. The irony of curtailing an activist protest at the AIDS conference was not lost on the protestors, who know that public access to ARVs in South Africa was fought for and won through public action.

TAC was part of the organising committee for the conference, and we have used our representation in this capacity to voice our concerns that community voices and the voices of PWAs have not been adequately heard. The issue of the Free State ARV moratorium has been largely ignored. So have shortages in drugs and medical supplies that are beginning to manifest in provinces across the country, including in Gauteng - the wealthiest province.

A thousand people continue to die of AIDS every day in South Africa. Dual ARV protocols for protecting the lives of pregnant women and their babies are not being implemented. People are suffering and dying on waiting lists for ARV treatment. The global financial downturn threatens funding for the life-saving programmes that HIV activists,

healthcare workers and governments have struggled to procure. The failure of government to budget adequately to achieve the targets laid out by the NSP will result in the continued, needless suffering and death of people living with HIV.

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