

November 13, 2008

Indigenous leaders call for action to reduce illness and death from tuberculosis

Toronto, Canada – During the 5 year period 2002-2006, the First Nations tuberculosis rate (on and off reserve) was 29 times higher than among the non-aboriginal population born in Canada. For the Inuit, it was 90 times higher. Pacific Islanders and Maoris are at least 10 times more likely to contract tuberculosis (TB) than other people living in New Zealand. The Indigenous people of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) are 45 times more likely to get active tuberculosis than Danish-born residents.

Across the globe Indigenous peoples are at exceptionally high risk of becoming ill with tuberculosis and dying from the disease. Today, for the first time, public health experts and Indigenous leaders from 60 countries began to carve out a plan to reduce the incidence of tuberculosis among Indigenous peoples by 2015, at a meeting co-hosted by the Assembly of First Nations and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami.

“Indigenous peoples are at special risk of TB because of the conditions under which many live – in poor housing and with lack of access to health services. They also face cultural barriers and language differences that limit their access to TB prevention and treatment,” said Dr Marcos Espinal, Executive Secretary of the Stop TB Partnership. “Without reaching these disadvantaged groups, we will not attain the targets of the Global Plan to Stop TB.”

“Many of the factors that allow tuberculosis to persist among Indigenous peoples around the world are similar to the challenges First Nations face in Canada. For example, one in five First Nations adults cannot access a doctor or nurse. Clearly, we need to improve access to healthcare,” said National Chief Phil Fontaine. “However, lasting solutions must also address the social determinants of health such as housing and nutrition. In turn, employment opportunities and wealth are created which are key to creating healthy people and sustainable communities.”

“The fact that the tuberculosis rates in Inuit communities are 90 times higher than for all Canadians is unacceptable. A lack of adequate housing, and overcrowding are contributing to this rate, and until we have addressed these and other determinants of health, the situation will not improve. We have a tragic history when it comes to tuberculosis, and unfortunately for many Inuit communities, it continues to be today’s reality,” said national Inuit leader Mary Simon.

There were more than 9 million new cases of tuberculosis worldwide in 2006, and some 1.7 million people around the world died from the disease—even though it is curable and the drugs needed to treat it are inexpensive and widely available. The vast majority of tuberculosis cases and deaths occur in low and medium-income countries and among disadvantaged people.

There are 370 million Indigenous people worldwide living in more than 70 countries. There are no firm global estimates for tuberculosis incidence in these populations, but evidence from targeted studies, such as among the Maori of New Zealand and aboriginal peoples in Canada, strongly suggest a high rate of tuberculosis among Indigenous groups living under similar conditions.

The meeting today was the follow-up to a session at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in April, which called for the development of a specific Indigenous-led initiative on TB to collaborate with the Stop TB Partnership.

***Note to Editors**

The Stop TB Partnership, which is hosted by the World Health Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, consists of more than 700 international organizations, countries, donors from the public and private sectors, and nongovernmental and governmental organizations that are working together to eliminate TB. The Partnership's Global Plan to Stop TB (2006-2015) sets forth a roadmap for halving TB prevalence and deaths compared with 1990 levels by 2015.