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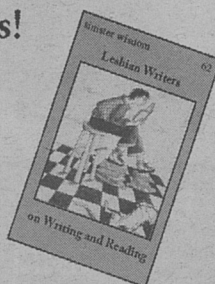
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Views: A View of the World at Bangkok

The world united in the struggle to confront HIV/AIDS converged on Bangkok for the XV International AIDS Conference, July 11-16. Record registration of 19,843 "delegates," underscored the global condition of HIV/AIDS and its spread. "Delegate" designation harkens back to the founding of the United Nations upon the devastation of World War II, when the U.S. government was truly inspired in its leadership. I was proud to be a delegate among my international fellows in Bangkok. I was not proud of the U.S. government.

American medical practitioners and scientific researchers, activists, loved ones - all those affected by and caring about HIV/AIDS - have been cherished team members and leaders in the ranks of those fighting the incredible human plague, a devastation beyond the 70 million thus far infected, the 30 million dead. We 70 million impact the struggles to live of so many hundreds of millions more.

My first international conference as a person living with HIV/AIDS was in 1992 in Amsterdam, when Harvard University had to host it from the Netherlands, since the first Bush government would not allow infected participants to enter the U.S. At least then our key government researchers, among the 3,000 Americans attending the conference, were in full presence. (Then-candidate Bill Clinton's party included a platform plank that recognized AIDS with needed frankness and commitment.)

Before the 2004 Bangkok conference, the current Bush Administration limited participation of medical researchers from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the Center for Disease Control (CDC) to 50 (236 attended the XIV conference two years ago in Barcelona). The lame excuse was that the travel money would be better spent on research. Most of us know that the limitation was because the world fighting HIV/AIDS has understanding and vision beyond the Bush ideologues. Conference organizers regarded the restrictions as "shameful" and expressed how much the Americans forbidden participation by their own government would be missed by their international colleagues.

At the opening ceremony,

**augustus
nasmith, jr**

Thai and international activists staged a well-organized, principled, and peaceful march to the entrance of the mammoth "Impact" conference center. Articulate, energetic regardless of their health or limited means, they called for equity in the global struggle, realization of the plight of marginalized groups, and that in all societies HIV/AIDS is the sparrow in the mineshaft. Special attention focused on helping Thai drug users who had experienced murderous police and misdirected public health policies. The President of the International AIDS Society, Director of the UNAIDS program, and Thai hosts came to receive letters from the protesters and to interact with those assembled.

In this atmosphere of democratic discourse, it was announced that Randall Tobias, President Bush's Global AIDS Coordinator, had been invited, but refused to come. Like the first President Bush, who would not visit the AIDS Quilt spread on Mall in 1991, Tobias declined the opportunity to relate, choosing instead to distance himself from the humanity of the epidemic. Tommy Thompson, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Chairman of the Board of the Global Fund for AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (The Global Fund) was no where to be seen in Bangkok.

Everyone from UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, Nelson Mandela and grassroots activists from developing and developed world find the Global Fund the entity most worthy and needing of additional support. In his conference speech, Tobias intoned that the Global Fund has not proven itself, and therefore didn't yet merit the additional funds from the U.S. that so many have urged. (Howard Dean pledged a significant increase in his campaign, and John Kerry does so in

his.) One wonders while still living with the destruction of going it alone in Iraq outside the UN, that we plow new ground to go it alone in the midst of global mass destruction that is hidden only to those who close their eyes.

The past two years and this conference itself brought no astounding medical breakthroughs in HIV/AIDS. However, the body of knowledge built up over the years, including the linkage of care to prevention, form bases to halt the progress of AIDS. Fulsome attention to funding, education, drug supply, training of health care workers - if properly implemented - will reduce infections and improve quality of life for those infected, their families and societies. We must keep pressure on finding creative means to lower prices and ensure accessibility for all who need life-prolonging drugs. We must provide economic empowerment, legal protections, and rational and compassionate religious, cultural and social involvement. The health of all - even the humanity of all - is impossible without removing stigma, discrimination, and abuse.

Thai participants and 2,000 volunteers at the conference, including those materially poor or "marginalized" in social status, brought smiles and humor in their welcomes to us and to each other. That spirit was mirrored by a small group of American Peace Corps volunteers who had come from various villages in Thailand. These young Americans symbolize our potential to do good when the United States will again be led by a government that is not afraid of "the other" but knows, like those of us in the world of HIV/AIDS, that we are truly part of the human family.

Our separation, our fear, the arrogance and selfishness that accompany them, are harmful to us all - including the consequences to our social fabric and the blocks to realization of our ideals and spiritual potential. ▼

Augustus "Gus" Nasmith, Jr. attended the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok, Thailand (July 11 - 16, 2004) participating for AIDS, Medicine & Miracles; the Vermont People with AIDS Coalition; Vermont CARES. These comments are his own and speak for no organization.

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Tel 802 775 4371
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mitchell.j.rosengarten@smithbarney.com
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