

INTERNATIONAL

U.N. experts underestimate AIDS' effect in Africa

GENEVA (AP) — U.N. experts compiling figures on HIV infection worldwide were stunned to learn over the past two years that they had missed millions of AIDS victims in Africa, a key official said last week.

"The big rise that we had over the last year was based on some shocking findings, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where we reached levels that we never thought could be reached," said Bernhard Schwartlaender, chief epidemiologist at the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS.

In the early 1990s, U.N. experts assumed that infection rates and patterns

were the same for all countries in a region.

For Africa they took the best data, from Uganda, and projected the numbers for the whole region.

But while infection rates were leveling off in Uganda, they continued to rise elsewhere, especially populous countries like Nigeria and South Africa.

By last year, more data became available.

"If you had talked to any of us a couple of years back and told us there would be levels of HIV infection of 25, 30, 40 percent in some countries, nobody would have believed that," Schwartlaender said.

The U.N. agency abandoned the regional approach and started working with each country, with more accurate figures and better knowledge of the varying patterns of infection and survival.

A year ago, the agency recalculated the figures it released for 1996 and realized the figures for Africa were incorrect.

The real number of people living with AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa was closer to 18.6 million—not 14 million as previously estimated.

The agency concedes that for many countries, it can still only make estimates.

"We are most comfortable

with the accuracy of that number," Schwartlaender said, though he added that researchers may be off by 20 percent to 25 percent in either direction.

The numbers need to be accurate so health workers can focus their efforts where they are most needed.

Determining the number of people who have died from AIDS is also a problem.

Many death certificates list only the immediate cause of death, such as pneumonia, and don't mention AIDS.

In some cultures, the stigma attached to AIDS is great and families try hard not to have the cause of death known.

Tanzanian welfare officer wants homeless women sterilized

By Asha Mnzavas

Special to Sentinel-Voice
DAR ES SALAAM, (AIA/GIN) — The suggestion by a welfare officer that female beggars, mentally ill women and street girls should be sterilized has created an uproar among human rights activists in Tanzania.

Jane Magembe, regional social welfare officer in Dodoma, the designated capital city of Tanzania, was quoted in the press as saying that female beggars, the mentally retarded and adolescent girls who spend their lives on urban streets should be given infertility drugs.

"The drugs, which should be administered by family planning experts, could help curtail the increase of the group," Magembe said.

Dodoma, Dar es Salaam, Arusha and Morogoro have hundreds of beggars. Magembe says in Dodoma entire families, with the exception of the oldest and the sick, move into towns to

earn a living from begging.

A prominent psychologist with the Social Welfare Training Institute, Dr. Andrew Mchomvu, described Magembe's suggestion as outrageous and against basic human rights as stipulated in the United Nations Charter for Human Rights.

"The U.N. charter says all human beings deserve a right to practice all rights including sex. So, sex is a right and not a luxury," he says.

"I have not come across a law in any country that bans mentally sick people and the disabled from having families. This question of sterilization has no place in Tanzania."

Joyce Mwandiga, a lawyer from the University of Dar es Salaam, said the suggestion was barbaric and resembled the dictatorial decisions made by Uganda's former president, Idi Amin, who once ordered that disabled people be drowned.

"That is outdated thinking which ought to be eliminated

in our society," she said. Mwandiga says the problem has stemmed from the government's failure to take care of the physically and mentally disabled.

The constitution of Tanzania categorically specifies that all human beings, regardless of any impairment, are equal and that no one is superior to anyone else, Mwandiga said.

Denying the disabled the right to family life, she said, was tantamount to reducing that group of people to a level not equal to that of human beings.

Yohana Isabu, the chairman of the Tanzania League for the Blind, also criticized the government.

"While the constitution gives automatic representation for women in Parliament, the disabled are neglected. This is the major reason why their rights are easily tampered with," he said.

Isabu argues that normal people cannot speak on behalf of the disabled because they

cannot feel what the disabled feel. "Disabled people should be consulted in matters pertaining to their lives," he said.

Dr. Ismail Yaseen, a private medical practitioner at the HB Medical Center in Dar es Salaam, says the mentally ill have the right to have children and enjoy family life.

"Forceful medication that ends the virility of a human being other than a natural biological transformation is not acceptable. Medicine should be used in the best interests of human beings and not to deprive them of their basic rights," he said.

The church has also severely criticized the suggestion, saying that it goes against God's teachings.

Law enforcers in Tanzania have tried to diminish the number of disabled beggars who line city streets to beg for alms.

In early October, police rounded up dozens of beggars at their street "homes" at night fall and charged them with loitering. Those arrested include disabled women and their children.

Official defends setting up township defense units

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP) — A top government official and former anti-apartheid guerrilla leader last week defended a policy of arming bands of township youths to fight white rule, despite their involvement in turf wars that cost thousands of black lives.

Deputy Defense Minister Ronnie Kasrils told an amnesty hearing of a human rights panel that self-defense units were vital in continuing the anti-apartheid struggle in the early 1990s.

"I am proud that I had participated in the establishment of such units because their role was to protect our communities from brutal attacks by evil forces," he told the Truth and Reconciliation Commission last Tuesday.

Kasrils, a commander in the armed wing of the African National Congress during apartheid, testified as a witness in the amnesty hearings of more than 100 applicants who include community members and members

of the defense units from black townships around Johannesburg.

The ANC won the country's first all-race elections in 1994 that ended apartheid. Kasrils is also expected to seek amnesty from the Truth Commission at a separate and as yet unannounced hearing.

Last month, the commission released a five-volume report on testimony from victims of apartheid-era political violence and assigned major blame for human rights violations to the National Party, apartheid's architect. But it also cited black anti-apartheid struggle groups — like those seeking amnesty at the hearings — for their excesses.

The commission has the power to grant amnesty to those who confess their crimes and can demonstrate a political motive — a process expected to last well into next year as decisions are made on over 7,000 amnesty applications.

WORLD BRIEFS

AZT TREATMENT PLANNED FOR HIV-INFECTED BOTSWANA MOTHERS

GABORONE (AIA/GIN) — The Botswana government is planning to spend \$4 million to provide the drug, AZT (Zidovudine), to pregnant women living with HIV/AIDS. AZT is believed to reduce the viral load and minimize the chances of transmission of the virus from mother to unborn child. Free breast-feeding substitutes will also be provided. Ministry of Health figures show that 43 percent of women attending pre-natal clinics in Gaborone and 34 percent in Francistown tested HIV positive. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Botswana has one of the five highest infection rates in the world with 14 percent of the population, more than 200,000 people, estimated to be living with the virus. Of these, 25 percent are from the sexually active and economically productive age group (15-49 years). Youngsters below the age of 15 account for 40 percent of those infected.

CITIZENS IN PUERTO RICO SUING GOV'T FOR FLOOD DAMAGE

ARECIBO, Nov. 12 (IPS) — Residents of the north coast town of Arecibo and at least two government agencies are suing the government for property damage sustained when Hurricane Georges swept through the Caribbean island almost two months ago. Six people were killed, thousands were left homeless, and damage is estimated to be in the billions of dollars. The residents claim that several structures, which were put up by the government recently, interfered with the natural downstream flow of water and led to the build-up of flood waters that damaged property more severely than normal. These projects include highway 10, which connects Arecibo to the mountain town of Utuado; the Electric Power Authority's (PREPA) Cambalache power plant, located in the Cienega Tiburones wetlands; and the northcoast super aqueduct, which now feeds the San Juan metro area from two reservoirs in the mountains of central Puerto Rico.

CANADIAN SCIENTISTS REJECT HORMONE GROWTH IN CATTLE

OTTAWA (IPS) — Environmentalists in Canada are supporting six government scientists who blew the whistle on politicians and chemical industry executives for allegedly trying to pressure them into approving the use of cattle growth hormones in the country. Recombinant Bovine Somatotropin (rBST), which has been used in the United States for five years, cannot be used in Canada until it is approved by the country's Department of Health. "They're under pressure to approve pharmaceuticals, pressure to approve veterinary drugs, pressure to approve substances that get into the food supplies of Canadians before adequate testing. There are some very serious allegations that have been made," said Elizabeth May, executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada. Although banned, traces of rBST have turned up in milk and cheese here as local farmers apparently have bought the hormone in U.S. border towns and smuggled it into Canada.

DR. DEXTER MORRIS, OPTOMETRIST

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