

INTERNATIONAL

Massive African anti-AIDS effort begins

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa (AP) — In the largest single corporate commitment to fight AIDS, Bristol-Myers Squibb is donating \$100 million over five years to speed research and train doctors to fight the disease in Africa, the continent hardest hit by the epidemic.

The move last week by the world's fifth-largest drug company comes amid criticism from government leaders that drugmakers charge too much for their AIDS drugs.

"It will have a tremendous impact," said Cornelius Baker, executive director of the National Association of People With AIDS, based in Washington, D.C.

Bristol officials said the donation was not in response to criticism on drug prices. Rather, company executives said they felt a moral obligation.

Don Hayden, Bristol's president of worldwide medicines, said the company, which had \$18.3 billion in sales last year, will still consider selling AIDS drugs at steep discounts in countries around the world. But, he said, no plans are imminent.

Bristol officials said they considered making a massive

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drug donation, but realized drugs alone would do little to stem the epidemic. "That would be benefit for some time but it would not change the course of the disease," said Barry Scott, vice president of Bristol's international division.

In a letter to New York-based Bristol, U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan lauded the effort, saying such partnerships between the public and private sectors are "critical" in controlling the epidemic which has killed 11.5 million people in sub-Saharan Africa - 83 percent of all AIDS deaths worldwide.

The program would: — Finance outside research into how best to fight AIDS in five southern African countries — South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Swaziland and Lesotho — where the epidemic has infected as many as one in four people and cut life expectancy by one-quarter.

The research would test

various combinations of drugs on an estimated 20,000 people over five years. The trials would also test other therapies, such as adjusting nutrition to find the most effective — and affordable — way to fight AIDS.

Finance fellowships for African doctors to study at programs administered by the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, and award fellowships for American physicians to work in the five countries.

The program would be directed by representatives from governments; UNAIDS, a UN advocacy group for fighting AIDS; and major medical facilities, including the Harvard AIDS Institute.

"Working together we can reverse the tide of death," Kenneth Weg, vice chairman of Bristol, said at a news conference in Johannesburg.

Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS, challenged other corporations to join the initiative, which is

part of an expanded effort by the corporate world to confront the AIDS epidemic.

"The key thing is to bring in new partners," he said.

On Monday, the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative announced it had received a \$25 million donation from Microsoft Corp. chairman Bill Gates.

Glaxo Wellcome, which produces AZT, recently offered to supply the South African government with the anti-AIDS drug at one-third of its market price. The government rejected the offer, saying the medication still would be too expensive.

In Africa, where few can afford the medicines that are saving the lives of AIDS victims in developed countries, the cost of pharmaceuticals is a touchy issue.

Last week, the office of Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's deputy president, accused drug companies of charging "exorbitant" prices for anti-AIDS drugs.

American officials, for their part, are angry that South Africa advocates the use of cheaper generic drugs, allegedly violating copyright laws and depriving companies that developed the drugs of profits.

WORLD BRIEFS

SOUTH AFRICAN JUDGE ADMITS HE'S HIV POSITIVE

JOHANNESBURG (IPS) — High court judge Edwin Cameron, South Africa's human and gay rights activist, recently announced that he is living with HIV. He is the first prominent person to do so in a country with one of the world's fastest growing epidemics. "The choice to speak is open to me ... because I have a job, position that is secure ... surrounded by loved ones and access to health care," said Cameron, who openly declared his homosexuality long ago. "For millions of South Africans living with HIV or AIDS, these conditions do not exist. They have no jobs, or their jobs would be at risk... they face grave personal danger if they do so," he said. One in eight South Africans is living with HIV, a figure which translates into 3.6 million of the country's 40.5 million people.

U.N. RESTORES VOTING RIGHTS TO SEVEN MEMBER STATES

UNITED NATIONS (IPS) — The 185-member U.N. General Assembly temporarily has restored the voting rights of seven member states who were disfranchised for not paying their dues to the world body. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cambodia, Congo-Brazzaville, Georgia, Guinea-Bissau, Honduras and Nicaragua are suffering economic crises, due to either internal strife or natural disaster. The U.N. Committee on Contributions, which studied appeals from the seven cash-strapped countries, decided there was a justification to exempt them from Article 19 of the U.N. Charter which strips members of their voting rights when the level of their arrears equals or exceeds two years' assessed contributions. Article 19 also states that the General Assembly may permit such a member to vote "if it is satisfied that the failure to pay is due to conditions beyond the control of the member."

AFRICA LOOKING FOR MUSICIANS INTRODUCE ON WORLD STAGE

NEW YORK (IPS) — African music is still looking for a musician with the charisma and talent of Bob Marley to do for the continent what the late reggae superstar did for the music of Jamaica. The leading contender for the title of "Most Popular Musician Out of Africa" is Yossou N'Dour, the 40-year-old singer from Senegal. "I have big respect for what Bob Marley did... I am trying the best I can but it's not as easy as people think," said N'Dour who has just completed a tour of the United States. N'Dour said the migration of hundreds of thousands of Africans to the United States over the past 10 years has given him a ready-made audience sympathetic to his music, which tackles topics from the environment to drug abuse to women's rights. N'Dour has performed with western pop stars like Bruce Springsteen and Peter Gabriel, who described his 5-octave voice as one of the finest in the world.

Nigeria building collapse kills 3

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — An apartment building under construction collapsed last month in Nigeria, killing at least three people and trapping others who had sought shelter from the rain, witnesses said.

Police and witnesses said less than a dozen people remained buried in the rubble, although state radio reported that dozens were trapped.

"All we heard was noise and the sand starting pouring from the top and the building was just falling on us," said Olusanya Banjo, a construction worker who was rescued. "It was God that saved us."

Rescuers were searching the rubble of the two-story apartment building. At least three bodies had been recovered and five survivors had been rescued.

Firefighters and onlookers clawed through the rubble with shovels and their hands in hopes of finding more survivors, whose cries could be heard above the din of the rescue.

Later, a bulldozer and other construction equipment was brought to the scene.

Witnesses said people were standing at a bus stop in Lagos when it began to rain. Trying to get out of the downpour, they fled for the shelter of the nearby building, which then collapsed.

One wing of the structure — a two-story concrete shell of an apartment building — remained standing.

Josephine Osun, the chairwoman of the neighborhood government, said inferior building materials caused the building's collapse.

Lagos is plagued by such collapses, with poorly constructed buildings falling apart in the rainy season.

Meningitis outbreak spreads in Sudan

KHARTOUM, Sudan (AP) — Meningitis has killed more than 1,500 people in Sudan during the past six months and the disease has spread to two more provinces, a health official said in remarks published Friday.

New cases of meningitis are being reported in the provinces of Nahr el-Nil and Shamalia in addition to the 18 provinces in the eastern, western and central Sudan where 1,513 people have died, the official, Bashir Ibrahim Mukhtar, said.

Mukhtar, an undersecretary in the Health Ministry, was quoted by the daily *Al-Anbaa* as saying that 21,337 people have been infected by the disease since December.

Another newspaper, *Al-Rai Al-Aam*, reported Friday that the Netherlands has donated \$80,000 to combat the epidemic.

The British Red Cross recently warned that more than 1 million people in eastern Sudan are at risk of infection.

Meningitis epidemics in the region usually begin during the dry season from December to February and sometime last more than a year. The disease, caused by a virus or bacteria, is fatal in 50 percent to 80 percent of cases if left untreated.



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