

# HIV/AIDS remain top global health quandary

By George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

BANGKOK, Thailand (NNPA) — Scientists and health leaders around the world have diagnosed and developed vaccines for many dreaded diseases. More than two decades after the discovery of AIDS, however, experts have learned a great deal about it — even to the point of developing life-extending antiretroviral drugs — but have yet to conquer the quickly-spreading pandemic. Every day, approximately 14,000 people are infected with HIV for the first time.

"AIDS is unique in human history in its rapid spread, its extent and the depth of its impact," according to UNAIDS 2004 annual report. "Since the first AIDS case was diagnosed in 1981, the world has struggled to come to grips with its extraordinary dimensions.

"... Now, more than 20 years later, 20 million people are dead and 37.8 million people worldwide are living with HIV. And still, AIDS expands relentlessly, destroying people's lives and in many cases seriously damaging the fabric of society."

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the infection that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), occurs when the body's immune system is weakened by HIV; it eventually develops diseases and cancers.

Sub-Saharan Africa has less than 11 percent of the world's population but almost two-thirds of the people living with HIV — 3 million people.

The most affected group, between 15 and 49 years old, represents more than 30 percent of the population in Swaziland and Lesotho. In Botswana, the infection rate for that age group has risen to 37 percent.

For women, the data is even more devastating. Every country in Africa for which data is available, women ages 15 to 49 represent more than 50 percent of all HIV infections, according to UNAIDS. In Angola, Burundi, Malawi and South Africa, the figure is 59 percent. It is 60 percent in Uganda and 65 percent in Kenya.

Consequently, life expectancy is down in many African countries. Between 1990 and 2002, life expectancy declined from 53.6 years to 36.3 years in Lesotho, from



An unidentified AIDS activist marches in protest towards the U.S. Center for Disease Control exhibition booth at the 15th International AIDS Conference in Bangkok last week.

56.6 to 33.9 in Zimbabwe and from 47.4 percent to 32.7 percent in Zambia, according to UNAIDS.

In the United States, one-quarter of the 850,000 to 950,000 people living with HIV or AIDS do not know their HIV status. African-Americans represent 12 percent of the U.S. population but about half of all new HIV infections.

A report made public here observes, "According to the US Centers for Disease Control, the proportion of AIDS cases among adults and ado-

lescent women in the United States has more than tripled since 1985. The epidemic has increased most dramatically among African-American and Hispanic women. Together, they represent less than one fourth of all women in the US, yet they accounted for 80 percent of AIDS cases reported among women in 2000."

The report, titled "Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis," was issued by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Na-

tions Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Experts at the recently concluded 15th International AIDS conference here acknowledge that the prospect of developing and marketing an effective vaccine is not in sight, certainly not within the next two decades, and say that the clinical trials now underway are not expected to yield any dramatic advances toward a cure.

Most of the sessions at the AIDS conference focused on

expanding prevention efforts and treatment of HIV/AIDS. When it comes to treatment, there is no universal agreement on the best approach.

President Bush has given preference to abstinence-only programs. Some experts hail what they call the ABC approach — "Abstinence, Be faithful and Condoms." Others champion their version of CNN — "Condoms, Needles and Negotiating Skills (for women)."

Neither approach has been widely adopted. Prevention programs reach fewer than one in five people who need them. A comprehensive approach could avert more than half — 29 million — of the 45 million new infections projected by 2010, experts say.

One of the great stories in health has been the lowered cost of life-extending antiretroviral drugs. The price of the drugs has plummeted from \$10,000 a year per person in 2000 to several hundred dollars a year, according to the General Accounting Office (GAO). Still, HIV/AIDS experts estimate that 5 million to 6 million people need HIV treatment in low- and middle-income countries. Only 7 percent — 400,000 — had access at the

end of 2003. There is also the issue of money.

A United Nations report says global spending on AIDS has increased from \$1.2 billion in 2000 to \$6 billion this year. Still, that represents a 50 percent shortfall. Estimates are that in order to comprehensively respond to the epidemic, \$12 billion annually will be needed by 2005 and \$20 billion by 2007.

In a speech to the 17,000 delegates to the international AIDS conference, former South African President Nelson Mandela urged everyone to do more. He said, "History will surely judge us harshly if we do not respond with the energy and resources that we can bring to bear in the fight against HIV/AIDS."

President Bush pledged last year to provide \$15 billion over five years to fighting HIV/AIDS, most of it going to Africa and the Caribbean. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan says the U.S. should be doing more.

"We hear a lot about weapons of mass destruction. We hear a lot about terrorism, and we are worried about the weapons of mass destruction because of their potential to" (See Health, Page 15)

## Women of color contracting AIDS at alarming rate

By George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

BANGKOK, Thailand (NNPA) — Although African-American and Latino women represent less than a quarter of all women in the United States, together they make up 80 percent of AIDS cases among women in the United States, according to a report made public here on Wednesday. The report, titled "Women and HIV/AIDS: Confronting the Crisis," draws on an array of federal and international statistics to track the spread of the virus.

"According to the US Centers for Disease Control, the proportion of AIDS cases among adults and adolescent women in the United States has more than tripled since 1985," the report says. "The epidemic has increased most dramatically among African-American and Hispanic women. Together, they represent less than one fourth of all women in the US, yet they accounted for 80 percent of AIDS cases reported among women in 2000."

AIDS is the leading cause of death for African-American women aged 25-34. Overall,

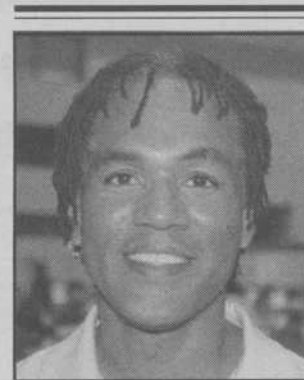
while women have become a larger share of AIDS cases in recent years, there are considerable racial differences. Black women represented nearly a third (34 percent) of newly-reported AIDS cases in 2001, compared to 15 percent for White women.

Experts note that many African-American women do not engage in high-risk behavior, but contract HIV through unprotected sex with male partners that either inject drugs or have sex with other men.

Phill Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute, says he is not surprised by the figures.

"Because of the disease's presence in our community, there is a higher viral burden," he says, noting that approximately half of all new HIV infections in the U.S. are among African-Americans.

"People don't like to talk about it but the family structure is less stable. Therefore, Black women are more likely to have more partners throughout their lifetime than White women and that's not a (negative) commentary on



"People don't like to talk about it but the (Black) family structure is less stable. Therefore, Black women are more likely to have more partners..."

— Phill Wilson, executive director of the Black AIDS Institute

Black women."

Because of the disproportionate number of Black males that serve time in prison, that, too, is a contributing factor, Wilson says.

In what is being called the "feminization" of HIV/AIDS, scholars and academics are paying increasing attention to the role gender plays in the spread of HIV/AIDS.

"Globally there are now 17 million women and 18.7 million men between the ages of 15 and 49 living with HIV/AIDS," says the report issued by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) and the United Nations Popula-

tion Fund (UNFPA). "Since 1985, the percentage of women among adults living with AIDS has risen from 35 percent to 48 percent."

In its 2004 report, on global AIDS, UNAIDS observed: "Nowhere is the epidemic's 'feminization' more apparent than in sub-Saharan Africa, where 57% of adults infected are women, and 75% of young people infected are women and girls. Several social factors are driving this trend.

"Young African women tend to have male partners much older than themselves — partners who are more likely than young men to be HIV infected. Gender inequalities in the region make it much more difficult for African

women to negotiate condom use. Furthermore, sexual violence, which damages tissues and increases the risk of HIV transmission, is widespread, particularly in the context of violent conflict."

The problem is so serious in some countries that up to 60 percent of today's 15-year-olds will not live to celebrate their 60th birthday.

"Strong leadership at all levels is required to address gender inequality as a central driver of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and to reverse the spread of the disease," the new jointly-issued report says. "Heads of State, government officials, policy makers and community and religious leaders must speak out strongly and urgently on the need to protect women and girls from violence and discrimination and to make gender and HIV/AIDS a highly visible priority."

In his address Sunday opening the 15th international conference on AIDS here, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan noted gender differences that contribute to the growth of HIV/ (See AIDS, Page 7)