

A new UN report

AIDS devastation in Africa

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A report issued by a United Nations agency, released October 28, spells out some of the horrifying consequences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic for sub-Saharan Africa. According to the 1998 Revision of the official UN world population estimates, prepared by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the average life expectancy in the 29 hardest hit African countries is now 47, 7 years less than it would be in the absence of the disease.

The Population Division has revised downward its projection that world population would increase to 9.4 billion by the year 2050 *by some 500 million people*, to 8.9 billion, as a result of the devastating mortality toll from HIV/AIDS. After taking the epidemic into account, forecasters were obliged to alter their population estimates for certain nations by as much as 23 percent.

The vast majority of the 30 million people currently infected with the HIV virus live in sub-Saharan Africa, in some of the world's poorest countries. In nine African countries HIV infects more than 10 percent of the population. Twenty-five percent of Botswana's adult population has HIV. Life expectancy in the impoverished southern African nation has already dropped sharply and is expected to fall by 20 years--from 61 to 41--by the year 2005. Based on UN projections, Botswana's population may be 23 percent smaller by 2025 than it would have been in the absence of AIDS.

The other countries with more than 10 percent of the population infected with HIV are Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Without AIDS, South Africa's population, currently 37.5 million, was expected to reach 52 million by 2015. Forecasters now predict that

it will be 43 million. AIDS killed 2.3 million people worldwide last year.

The Washington-based Worldwatch Institute, in a report issued last month that anticipated the UN figures, drew some startling conclusions. It noted that demographers use a three-stage model with which to study the development of population growth rates: stage one, during which birth and death rates are both high, leading to little or no population growth; stage two--death rates fall while birth rates remain high; and stage three--birth rates fall, balancing low death rates, leading to population stability. There are no countries presently categorized as stage one. However, referring to the countries affected by AIDS, the report noted that 'instead of progressing to stage three as expected, some countries are in fact falling back into stage one as the historic fall in death rates is reversed, leading the world into a new demographic era.'

The report continued: 'Barring a miracle, these societies [the hardest hit African countries] will lose one fifth or more of their adult population within the next decade from AIDS alone.' It added that such 'high mortality trends' are 'more reminiscent of the Dark Ages than the bright new millennium so many had hoped for.'

The death rate from AIDS has been lowered in the advanced industrial countries thanks to the development of cocktails of drugs. These treatments are financially out of reach of the African poor. This brutal economic reality is treated by analysts and media commentators, when it is referred to, as a natural and unchangeable phenomenon.

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