

Zambia: AIDS reduces life expectancy to 33 years

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Life expectancy has fallen to 33 years in Zambia, making it the lowest in the world.

According to new government figures the average life expectancy fell from 44 to 33 years of age between 1990 and 2000, in a dramatic collapse brought about by rampant poverty and the spread of AIDS.

The average income in Zambia is \$380 a year, a 60 percent fall from its 1975 level. This means that the vast majority of Zambians are unable to afford anti-retroviral drugs, hospital treatment, or even an adequate diet.

In 1991 69.7 percent of the population was officially classified as living in poverty. That figure rose to 73.2 percent by 1998.

The Zambian Central Statistical Office does not report an up-to-date figure for poverty. But unemployment has risen sharply, especially in the copper belt and the capital Lusaka. Unemployment has risen from 14 percent to 30 percent in Lusaka, while in the copper belt it has risen from 17 to 25 percent. The current poverty figures must therefore be far higher than those recorded five years ago.

So drastic is the deterioration in economic and social conditions in Zambia that, contrary to all international trends, the rate of urbanisation has declined. The flow of migration has reversed, with unemployed workers returning to the countryside in an attempt to scratch a living on the land.

The fertility rate has also fallen. On average Zambian women are bearing one less child than was the case ten years ago. A fall in fertility is often associated with growing prosperity and improved economic opportunities for women. In Zambia, however, it is the result of the higher rate of HIV/AIDS among women than men. According to Human Rights Watch, girls and young women are five times more likely to be HIV

positive than boys and young men, due to sexual abuse by older men.

On average one in five Zambians is HIV positive, but the rate is higher in urban areas. According to Zambian treasury data AIDS is killing 200 people a day. As a result half a million children are already orphaned and the figure is expected to rise to one million by 2010. Half of all Zambian children under 15 have lost one parent. Three quarters of families are caring for at least one orphan.

President Levy Mwanawasa's response to this human disaster has been to deny that the epidemic has reached such proportions. On a recent visit to India, where he was looking for investment, he told the *Times of India* that the infection rate was only 15 percent and would soon be down to 2 percent.

The pro-government Zambian press is also downplaying the epidemic and claiming that there are viable alternatives to anti-retroviral drugs. The *Times of Zambia* is boosting what are euphemistically called "affordable treatment options." These include eating a balanced diet, avoiding illness and having access to clean water.

On an income of barely a dollar a day, even such minimal treatment is beyond reach. Anti-retroviral drugs have cut the death rate from AIDS in the West and could be used to do the same in Africa, but countries like Zambia are too poor to buy them.

Rather than helping countries like Zambia get access to vital medicines, the international financial institutions and Western governments have caused the African economies to collapse. The result has rightly been called genocide by virus.

Zambia should be one of the richest countries in Africa, with its massive copper and cobalt deposits. But this mineral wealth has been of no benefit to the people

of Zambia, because these resources have been developed purely for the profit of the major corporations and banks.

The whole economy has been based entirely on the export of copper. Even after independence in 1963, Zambia remained subordinated to the same economic imperatives that had shaped its existence as a colony of Britain.

With the collapse of copper prices Zambia was forced into the hands of the IMF and World Bank, which today virtually run the economy. In 1999, then President Chiluba privatised the copper mines under an IMF programme. The result was mass unemployment. Striking miners and railway workers were brutally suppressed by military police and soldiers.

Zambia was declared to be a candidate for debt relief under the IMF/World Bank Heavily Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) scheme in December 2000. A recent report by Jubilee Research, an NGO campaigning for debt relief, has analysed the effects of this programme on Zambia. It estimates that even with HIPC status Zambia will still have to pay nearly \$1.2 billion over the period 2002 to 2009—\$150 million each year in debt repayments.

All the assumptions on which Zambia's repayments are being worked out are overoptimistic, according to the report. The IMF and World Bank assume a growth rate of 4.9 percent between 2000 and 2009 and an increase in government revenue from \$554 million to \$1,164 million between 1999 and 2010. They suggest that Zambia's exports will rise from \$841.7 million to \$2,348 million over the same period.

A World Bank delegation is currently visiting Zambia to determine whether this impoverished country should be awarded HIPC status. The price demanded seems to be that Zambia should press ahead with further privatisations. After the copper mines the choice target is ZESCO, Zambia's power utility.



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