

Report details spread of global AIDS epidemic

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Last year saw a major spread of the global AIDS epidemic. According to the report “2006 Aids Epidemic Update” published by the United Nations bodies UNAIDS and the World Health Organisation (WHO), an estimated 39.5 million people now live with HIV, and in 2006 alone 4.3 million became infected with the HIV virus and 2.9 million died from the effects of AIDS.

The number living with the disease is up by 2.5 million since 2004, whilst those newly infected rose by around 400,000 over the same period. Newly acquired infections of young people between 15 and 24 were responsible for 40 percent of the total.

The report notes: “In the past two years the number of people living with HIV increased in every region in the world. The most striking increases have occurred in East Asia and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where the number of people living with HIV in 2006 was over one fifth (21 percent) higher than in 2004.”

Sub-Saharan Africa still bears the brunt of disease with nearly two-thirds of the global number of people with HIV, around 25 million. An estimated 2.8 million became newly infected this year whilst 70 percent of the deaths due to AIDS, around 2 million, were in this region of the world. The report notes that women are disproportionately affected: “Not only are they more likely to than men to be infected with HIV, but in most countries they are also more likely to be the ones caring for people living with HIV.” The report notes many women are being infected by their husbands who have caught the disease as a result of having paid sex. In Mumbai it was found that 54 percent of sex workers are HIV infected.

Southern Africa is the epicentre of the pandemic, with a third of the global number of people living with the disease and a third of deaths.

The report states that in many countries in the region the prevalence of the disease appears to have become stable, but notes: “The number of people newly infected with HIV roughly equals the number of people dying of AIDS.” In South Africa, however, where the HIV epidemic emerged after other countries, the number of deaths from AIDS continues to increase. The report notes that the death rate (from all causes) increased by nearly 80 percent between 1997 and 2004 as a result of the impact of HIV.

Countries in this region have amongst the world’s highest prevalence of the disease. In Zimbabwe around 20 percent of the population is infected, with similar numbers in Botswana, Lesotho and Namibia. Swaziland has the highest rate in the world, with an adult infection rate of approximately one-third of the population. The report notes that for many countries in this region “the epidemics do not yet show signs of abating.”

Whilst the provision of antiretroviral drugs (AVRs) has increased tenfold since 2003 in the region, still only a quarter of those with the disease are receiving them.

Asia, including China and India, has nearly 9 million people living with the disease. Over the last year nearly a million became newly infected and two-thirds of a million died of AIDS. Whilst the number of people receiving AVRs has trebled since 2003, still only 16 percent of those in need are receiving the drugs.

With the world’s largest population, China has over two-thirds of a million living with the disease. Incidence of the disease is high amongst at-risk groups. The report notes nearly half the cases of those infected with HIV were as a result of injecting drugs. A further 50 percent of the new HIV cases result from unprotected sex. The report notes the effect of “HIV spreading gradually from most-at-risk groups to the

general population.”

India has nearly 6 million living with the disease. Two-thirds of these are concentrated in just six of the country's 28 states. These states comprise the most industrialised states in the south, west and northeast.

According to the report, in Afghanistan “conditions favour the rapid spread of HIV.”

In Latin America, most of the estimated 1.7 million people living with HIV are found in Brazil, Argentina, Colombia and Mexico. The report notes: “HIV transmission is occurring in the context of ... widespread poverty and migration, insufficient information about epidemic trends outside major urban areas and rampant homophobia.” Brazil, with a third of the number of people living with HIV in Latin America, has conducted a programme of treatment and prevention which has held the epidemic numbers stable for several years.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia have seen a 20-fold increase in the HIV rate over the last decade. This region includes much of the former Soviet Union and the rapid growth of HIV reflects the general devastation of social conditions following the restoration of capitalism. According to the report, 250,000 people were newly infected with HIV during the course of 2006, bringing the total in the region living with the disease to 1.7 million. One-third of the newly infected are aged between 15 and 24. Provision of AVRs reaches only 13 percent of those in need.

The regions of North America, Western and Central Europe saw an additional 65,000 newly infected people. The near universal provision of AVRs means those developing AIDS in these regions are able to live with the condition for an extended period. However, the pattern of newly acquired infections is affected by social conditions. In the US the rate of new HIV or AIDS diagnoses for African-American men is seven times that of white men.

In Britain the rate of HIV infection nearly doubled between 1998 and 2005. London accounted for nearly half the new infections in 2005. HIV has become one of the principal communicable disease threats in Britain.

Twenty-five years after the initial spread of HIV the world faces an ongoing human catastrophe. The absolute number of those with the disease continues to grow each year. As the AIDS information web site *Avert* noted in 2006, “Half a million children became

infected with HIV because their mothers did not have access to drugs to prevent them passing the virus. Without treatment, half of these children will die by 2008. The number of children orphaned by AIDS surpassed the 15 million mark.”

The figures are an indictment of the capitalist profit system. The non-profit Global Aids Alliance organised a telephone conference on November 28 to preview World Aids Day. In his opening remarks, Dr. Paul Zeitz of the alliance noted that “the virus is still far outpacing our efforts to control it.” He continued, “Earlier this year, there was an international agreement signed onto by the President [Bush] to achieve universal access to prevention, treatment and care by 2010, just four years from now ... unfortunately there is no real US strategy to reach that target.”

Another contributor was Marcel Van Soest, the executive director of the World Aids Campaign (WAC). Van Soest, an epidemiologist and social geographer, works with Medecins Sans Frontier (MSF). In his opening remarks he praised the energy and dedication of many groups to combat AIDS, adding, “There is the hope of a real vision of a world without the AIDS. But the tragic reality is that today's leaders in every sector are failing in their response.”

AIDS has claimed more lives than the Black Death and is likely to become the worst epidemic to have ever affected humanity. A recent report issued by WHO predicts that without drastic intervention nearly 120 million will have died of the disease by 2030.



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