

AIDS sweeps unchecked throughout Africa

by Mary Lalevé

"The costs of testing one person for AIDS, are in many countries higher than the amount spent annually on health per capita," said Jon Tinker, head of the Panos Institute, a London-based research facility which recently published a report on AIDS in the Third World. In Africa, governments' spending on health care has been drastically cut over the last 10 years, thanks to falling export prices, growing foreign debt payments, and austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

Speaking at the recent UNCTAD meeting in Geneva, the deputy executive director of the U.N. Children's Educational Fund (UNICEF), Richard Jolly, euphemistically described "the neglect of human factors" (i.e., severe economic adjustment policies) leading to a reversal of social progress in about half of the developing countries. "Nutritional status and/or school enrollment had deteriorated in at least 35 countries and had slowed down in perhaps half of the developing countries. In Africa and Latin America, rates of infant and child survival, which had slowly but steadily improved during the 1960s and 1970s, actually declined in a smaller but still relevant number of countries in the 1980s."

Given this situation, it is hardly surprising that the AIDS virus is sweeping almost unchecked through the continent, particularly hitting the urban populations. The Organization of African Unity foreign ministers meeting in Addis Ababa at the end of July, called for "effective and coordinated action" against the epidemic. They called for the creation of "special teams" in collaboration with the World Health Organization "to fight the plague." They also called on member governments to take "legislative and other steps" to control and limit AIDS' spread.

Actions by African governments so far have been limited to introducing checks on the blood supply, where possible, and "education campaigns" designed by the World Health Organization, promoting condoms.

While figures for the total number of infected are not available, the WHO estimate of 5 million on the continent (Africa's population south of the Sahara is approximately 350 million) is certainly a vast underestimate. Some recent figures give a hint of the degree of the spread of the disease:

- In Zimbabwe, a report by a local insurance company said, "It is possible that in just over 6 years, an estimated

70% of Zimbabwe's urban population could be carriers of AIDS. . . . By 1993, experts have estimated that it is possible that over 1.5 million people may be carriers of AIDS in the urban areas of Zimbabwe alone, with nearly 17,000 terminal cases amongst both men and women."

- In South Africa, there has been a meteoric rise in the number of cases reported. In 1986, the government reported less than 20 cases, all white men. According to South African Minister of National Health Dr. Wille van Niekerk, speaking in parliament on July 28, the latest figures showed that 2,234 AIDS carriers had been identified in the country. Of these, 1,140 were white, 1,093 black (946 of them miners), 31 coloreds, three Asians, and 57 unknown. An anonymous confidential register is kept at the South African Institute for Medical Research. The figures among black miners may be far higher, according to a survey done by the South African Chamber of Mines. After having tested only 10% of the miners, 1,000 infected people have been found. Black miners generally are obliged to live in all-male hostels near the mines, where prostitution, homosexuality, and drug-use are rife.

- In Zambia, the number of reported AIDS patients has almost doubled from 207 in March to 395 in July, said the assistant director of medical services, Dr. Sam Nhawa, speaking after a four-day tour of the Copperbelt, the industrial heart of Zambia. He said the Copperbelt alone accounted for 46% of all cases, with the capital Lusaka accounting for 18%. About 80% of the AIDS patients are between the ages of 20 and 40 years. He also announced that all 33 blood-screening centers in the country are operational, and that it is now safe to have blood transfusions without fear of contracting AIDS. It is estimated that 6,000 babies with AIDS will be born this year.

- In Uganda, the government has estimated that 10% of the country's 14 million inhabitants are infected. An educational campaign has begun, costing \$20 million. The Panos Institute estimates that 15% of the "sexually active population" in the capital city, Kampala, are infected. In the border towns of Malaba and Busia, as many as 80% of women and 30% of the male population are infected with AIDS, according to the head of the Ugandan health authority, Eakoja Jjegwe.

- In Zaire, figures are not available, but the situation is known to be very bad. The Rockefeller Foundation has financed the free distribution of condoms.

- In Ruanda, the government reports that 20% of the urban population is infected.

- In Niger, the government has set up an AIDS control committee, and has defined an emergency program to follow the development of the epidemic. So far, only 10 cases have been detected in the largely desert country.

In sum, many nations face extinction in the decades immediately ahead. Clearly, far more must be done to check the spread of the plague than distribute condoms.