

From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

Flap over AIDS testing

The protest by foreign students puts the issue of a battle plan against AIDS on center stage.

In August 1986, it was decided at a top-level meeting of officials of the Education Department and the External Affairs and Health Ministries, that all foreign students in India would have to undergo a test to determine whether they were carrying the AIDS virus. There are about 25,000 foreign students in India, about 80% or more from African countries.

A circular marked "Strictly Confidential" was promptly sent out to the 140-odd educational institutions in the country, ordering them to implement the decision and report back on their actions.

Six months later, after several score more AIDS cases have been discovered in the country (including the case of several African students who were deported in January) and after a January reminder to the university vice-chancellors from the Human Resources Ministry, the move to implement these orders has provoked a firestorm of protest from foreign students.

The protest erupted at Bombay University, where officials made admission to the year-end exam conditional on the AIDS test certificate, and then spread to Delhi and Lucknow. Foreign students in Delhi have called a protest march against "arbitrary and discriminatory AIDS test requirements," and vowed not to comply.

Days before the Bombay outburst, Delhi University authorities had sent a letter to all affiliated colleges mandating "urgent action" on the AIDS test for foreign students. Now they are

stalled in consultations with the Human Resources Ministry.

By contrast, in Madras, all the estimated 300 foreign students have already been tested without protest. One exception was found seropositive for AIDS.

Foreign student leaders in Delhi have demanded that the university suspend the requirement for the AIDS test until after the April/May exam period, or until efforts to seek reversal of the government policy are exhausted. In a letter to the vice-chancellor, African Students Association (India) President Ndirangu Maina charged that the idea that AIDS was an African virus was unscientific and racist—a charge reflecting the cynical Soviet disinformation campaign pushed by the pro-Moscow daily *Patriot*.

At the Delhi protest meeting, African students and their Indian sympathizers attacked the government policy on AIDS testing as a reversal of India's pro-Africa stand. But many students interviewed in the Indian press said they did not personally oppose the test, but failed to see why all students and all foreigners shouldn't be tested.

It is a happy coincidence that the controversy surfaced just as Parliament convened for the budget session. On the second day of Parliament, the issue surfaced during question hour, drawing a categorical statement from Union Minister for Human Resources and Development P.V. Narasimha Rao, that the medical checks of foreign students would continue. "It is much too serious a matter to be jaun-

diced by protests and complaints," Rao said, in response to MPs' complaints that the practice would spoil India's relations with the African countries. Rao added that allegations of harassment, etc., would be looked into.

The minister was also asked why only foreign students were being tested, and not also foreign tourists. To Rao's reply that tourists stay just a short while, whereas students spend a year or more, an MP queried, "How much time does it take to pass the infection?"

Indeed. The proposal to subject foreign tourists, as well as all blood donors, to the AIDS test requirement had been made a year ago, following confirmation of the first several AIDS cases in Madras. Now, according to press reports, total AIDS cases in the country stands at 86.

Moreover, doctors in Delhi report a significant increase in the last several months in the number of foreigners taking treatment at the city's several posh private clinics. A 45-year-old American tourist died of AIDS recently in one of these clinics, and a Swede was rehabilitated sufficiently to be put on a plane back to Sweden.

The experience has proven to medical officials here what they already know: India does not have the infrastructure to be able to efficiently check for the disease. As of year's end, the health ministry's proposal for a \$6 million AIDS Control Strategy, has not been cleared by the Planning Commission.

So far, in fact, not a single penny has been allocated for the AIDS program. A series of TV advertisements warning against promiscuity and sharing razor blades, has been squeezed out of petty cash funds, and the 23 surveillance centers in the country, equipped only with the inconclusive Elisa test, are functioning on an ad hoc basis.