

Congress Addresses the AIDS Crisis

by Suzanne Rose

The belated official recognition by the U.S. government of the enormity of the AIDS pandemic, in the CIA report "The Global Infectious Disease Threat and Its Implications for the United States," released in January, has set off Congressional initiatives. Representatives have introduced legislation to increase the resources available internationally to deal with this deadly threat, including support for debt relief in Africa. A forum on Sept. 12, sponsored by the Global Health Council and the Congressional Task Force on International HIV/AIDS, reflected the current focus on this crisis.

Unfortunately, the expressed concern does not correspond to a willingness to drop the method of thinking about economics, which has allowed the epidemic to grow out of control. There persists a small-minded approach to the economic breakdown which has propelled the spread of the disease, especially in Africa. This is manifest by an unwillingness to consider the large-scale infrastructure development necessary to lift Africa out of the crisis, and a mechanistic approach to the spread of the disease, which does not take into account nutritional, sanitation, and other basic public health factors, and ignores the multiple pathways of transmission.

The current discussions also generally accept "budget constraints" as sacrosanct, which means that a crash program to stop the epidemic will not be considered. Such a crash program is represented by the efforts for over 25 years of Lyndon LaRouche and associates, who, as early as 1974, defined such an epidemic as the necessary outcome of economic austerity policies, introduced in the early 1970s, which led to economic breakdown.

The Sept. 12 forum, "Generations in Peril; Children Orphaned by HIV/AIDS," highlighted the numbers and conditions of AIDS orphans, and the demographic catastrophe in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 70% of the infected population resides. Nils Daulaire, president of Global Health Council, said that by the end of the year, 13 million children, one-third of whom are under five years of age, will have lost one or more parents.

Dr. Peter Piot, executive director of the United Nations AIDS program, said that of the 34 million estimated to be HIV-infected, 1.3 million are under 15, and 11% of the new infections are among children under 15.

Rep. Connie Morella (R-Md.), a member of the task force, underlined the seriousness of the problem. "The good news," she said, is that the pandemic is recognized. "The bad news"

is the tragic consequences for southern Africa. She reported that in Zimbabwe, of adults between 25 and 44, one in four has AIDS. The average life expectancy is 38 years, and 90% of the children who are orphaned are in Sub-Saharan Africa. She said she sees the issue as a national security crisis for the United States.

Dr. Piot said that, with the recognition given at the UN Millennium Summit by the heads of state and government, most of whom recognized the danger of AIDS in their remarks, the moment is at hand for seriously addressing the problem. This would have been unprecedented six months ago, and illustrates that AIDS is at the top of the political agenda. He said we have to use this political momentum to deal with the crisis. The full impact of this epidemic on society is unforeseeable; we are only beginning to realize what will happen, and that the reality is much worse than the worst-case scenarios of the late 1980s, he said.

Need for Debt Cancellation

During the question period, *EIR* pointed out that the epidemic was not driven by "Mother Nature," but by conditions of economic breakdown, especially in Africa, and asked Dr. Piot to elaborate on the proposal he had made at the annual international AIDS conference, in Durban, South Africa, for cancellation of African debt so that the \$15 billion paid annually in interest could be redirected to deal with public health, sanitation, nutrition, and other areas vital for solving the AIDS crisis. Dr. Piot responded that the AIDS epidemic didn't develop in a vacuum, but under conditions of poverty. He said that in the long run, we need a vaccine; and we need to reduce poverty. We need to reduce the need for people to move from rural areas to the cities. "We need a long-term agenda of economic and social development. Africa pays four times on their debt what they pay on health and education programs. They need debt cancellation. This will free up domestic resources to deal with the crisis."

Susan Hunter, with UNICEF and the U.S. Agency for International Development, and author of *Children on the Brink*, presented more alarming figures. In the 34 countries studied in her book, epidemic infection levels are higher than anyone could have imagined, she said. Her figures, from the U.S. Bureau of the Census, included the facts that, in Botswana, 1 in 3 adults ages 15-49 is infected; in Zimbabwe, 29%; and five of the countries in Africa have greater than 20% infection rates in that age-range. She said that the total number of orphans in the 34 countries studied, mostly in Africa, is 34.7 million.

The non-governmental organizations attending the hearing promoted idiotic "community-based" solutions, and actually attacked the idea of increasing aid, which they called "throwing money at the top," (i.e., governments) to deal with the problem. They focussed on the need to "support the people on the front lines."

Sandra Thurman, director of the White House Office of

National AIDS Policy, concluded the briefing by emphasizing that the epidemic is out of control, and we are at a critical juncture. "It is putting democracies and economies in peril. The world is being devastated. . . . We have a lot of momentum," she said, "so we must seize the moment."

She too stressed the inadequacy of existing resources, saying that we have a "war" on our hands and must "get in gear." Dr. Thurman specified \$3 billion a year in Africa alone, to mount a serious effort—ten times what the international community is currently contributing.

Inadequate Legislation

On Aug. 19, President Clinton signed into law H.R. 3519, the "World Bank AIDS Prevention Trust Fund Act." It was sponsored by Jim Leach (R-Iowa) and Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) in the House, and Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) in the Senate. Speaking on the House floor in support of the bill, Leach said, "The stark reality is that the world today is confronted with the greatest health crisis in human history," comparing it to the bubonic plague of the 14th Century, during which 20 million died. "Within a year or two, as many will have died from HIV/AIDS as died from the bubonic plague, and within a decade, the toll could be a multiple of that figure. Analogously, it is increasingly self-evident that eradication of this deadly disease is the most important issue of our time."

But the legislation Leach sponsored creates a World Bank AIDS Trust fund with a paltry \$300 million to pay for education, testing, counselling, prevention of *in utero* transmission, and care for those living with HIV or AIDS. In his remarks, Leach also asserted that it was necessary to be mindful of "budget restraints."

Other bills urge more funds for prevention and care. Rep. Maxine Walters (D-Calif.) has introduced H.R. 5101, the "Affordable HIV/AIDS Medicines for Poor Countries Act," to cheapen the cost of AIDS medicines.

The "Global Health Act of 2000" (H.R. 2836 and S. 2387) includes a call for \$1 billion over the appropriated FY 2000 level, and \$275 million for HIV/AIDS treatment for the 34 million already infected. Sponsors include Rep. Joseph Crowley (D-N.Y.), whose Queens district was the epicenter of the West Nile virus last year, and Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.).

An important bill was introduced by Rep. Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-Ill.) in 1999, "To authorize a new trade, investment, and development policy for Sub-Saharan Africa" (H.R. 772), as an alternative to the Administration's "Africa Trade and Investment" bill. Jackson's bill would have cancelled, without conditions, the entirety of the debt owed to the United States by nations in Sub-Saharan Africa. So far, such radical action is not being seriously entertained by the U.S. Congress.

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