

Israel pioneers public health measures against AIDS threat

by Muriel Mirak

On Aug. 25, Israel became the first nation of the Western world to institute serious public health measures aimed at stemming the growth of the species-threatening AIDS pandemic. If the measures announced on that date by the Health Ministry are followed by other steps, as yet implicit in the government program, Israel may contribute to effecting a long-overdue shift in government attitudes toward AIDS, and to break the stranglehold which the liberal lobby, largely dominated by "gay rights" groups, has had over preventive action. Internally, the testing measures announced will also tend to fuel the renewed momentum in Israel toward a project-oriented economic policy, abandoning the recent trends toward "post-industrial" service sector thinking.

The announcement, made by Israeli Health Minister Shoshana Arbeli-Almoslino, came during a four-hour meeting held with representatives of the Education and Labor Ministries, and officials from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), the kibbutz movement, and the health sector. She announced that AIDS would be listed under the category of communicable diseases, which currently includes smallpox, cholera, malaria, yellow fever, and typhus. By adding AIDS to the list, the health minister deftly took a shortcut through what would otherwise be a time-consuming legislative process, to push a bill for testing through the Knesset (parliament).

According to Israeli emergency health regulations, the director-general of the Health Ministry has the power to "remove, isolate or arrest and send for laboratory tests" anyone who is suspected of carrying a communicable disease. Since, according to current literature on AIDS, prostitutes and intravenous drug users are among the "high-risk" groups of AIDS infected, these social layers can be required to submit to testing.

In her initial announcement, Minister Arbeli-Almoslino said that male and female prostitutes would be tested every six months for the disease. Those testing negative will be issued an "AIDS-free" certificate, which they will be required to show. Anyone practicing prostitution without such a certificate can be arrested, and forced to submit to a test. Those testing positive, will be barred from prostitution. Tests will be administered at government expense and in "complete

privacy," the minister said.

Although a spokesman for the Health Minister told *EIR* that general screening of the population has not been discussed yet, the possibility that the military and education sectors will be screened opens the way for general testing. Mrs. Arbeli-Almoslino did announce that a pilot project screening program will start soon, at an army induction center.

General screening ahead?

This could be the first step in testing all military personnel. Since a large portion of Israel's 4 million inhabitants serves in the IDF, either on active duty or on reserve basis, that would be tantamount to general screening. In fact, the chief medical officer of the IDF, Tat-Aluf Yehuda Danon, in commenting on the AIDS program, said, "If there is reason to check every soldier, then perhaps there is reason to check the entire population."

There is reason, indeed. Israel is a tiny country, with a very small population. Government figures, discussed at the recent inter-ministerial meeting, indicate that from 2,000 to 10,000 Israelis are prostitutes. The number of intravenous drug users is also high. In addition to these so-called "risk groups," the broader layers of the population have been experiencing a drastic cut in living standards, due to austerity measures over the past years.

The sector which was most seriously hit by the cuts, ordered in compliance with International Monetary Fund conditionalities, was the health sector—ironically, one of the areas in which Israel is the most advanced. Cutbacks in hospital personnel and funds for medical research were the leading edge of a broader austerity program which has deteriorated living conditions.

As researchers in Belle Glade, Florida and elsewhere have documented in *EIR*, the spread of the AIDS pandemic correlates closely with low nutrition levels, inadequate housing facilities and, especially in tropical areas, mosquito and other insect-infested conditions. Add to this the fact of rampant homosexuality in Arab culture, which predominates in the Middle East, and it is clear that Israel's decision to intro-



A 1986 demonstration in California against Proposition 64, the anti-AIDS referendum. Now the Israeli government has declared AIDS a dangerous communicable disease, as Proposition 64 would have done.

duce testing has come not a moment too soon.

The responses to testing thus far monitored among Israelis have been healthy and rational. The AIDS panic first broke out in Tel Baruj, the area most densely frequented by prostitutes, when the health authorities announced that five prostitutes had been found infected. The majority of the prostitutes willingly submitted to tests, both out of fear of the disease and out of concern that the ensuing panic might destroy the "business." More reluctant were the pimps, whose ranks include a large number of drug addicts. According to a municipal study done in the area, 8% of the prostitutes and 30% of the pimps had tested positive.

Although the government is not yet planning to test homosexuals and bisexuals, for fear of a negative reaction, it is reported that members of the "gay" community have shown great willingness to undergo testing. Prisoners have also been subjected to AIDS tests, on a preliminary basis. According to the head of the health department for the Prisons Service, Dr. Ya'acov Ziegelbaum, 30 out of 4,000 convicts tested had AIDS antibodies, but had not yet developed symptoms of the disease.

Measures including the use of "one-way" resuscitation masks have been introduced into hospitals, to protect health workers from possible infection.

Will to survive

The fact that there does not appear to be a large "gay" lobby-led effort to block effective measures against AIDS in Israel is coherent with two other developments internally which have manifested an underlying "will to survive" in the national ideology. First, is a broad debate on euthanasia which was sparked by proposed legislation to introduce a "Patients' Bill of Rights." Reflecting similar "right-to-die"

legislation passed or under discussion in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Great Britain, and the United States, the Bill of Rights would allow a patient to refuse treatment.

Dr. Ram Ishai, the head of the Israel Medical Association, has voiced his objection to the proposed legislation, on the grounds of medical ethics, which he feels are not adequately considered by the bill. As analogous cases in Western Europe and the United States have shown, once compromises are made with such "right to die" legislation, the way is opened for institutionalizing euthanasia of persons afflicted with "incurable" diseases, first and foremost among them, AIDS.

Second, the recent Cabinet vote to discontinue the controversial Lavi jet project, has signaled a shift in overall government economic thinking (see page 44). The Lavi project, promoted by former Minister without Portfolio Moshe Arens and Industry Minister Ariel Sharon, aimed at transforming Israel into a weapons-producing economy.

Sharon's allies internationally are associated with the later Meyer Lansky's organized crime grouping, which has been engineering to make of Israel a "little Switzerland" banking haven for the proceeds of illegal drugs and weapons traffic. With the vote against the Lavi, the Israeli cabinet also voted implicitly against this economic perspective, in favor—it is hoped—of a return to the Marshall Plan development perspective launched by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

To deal with the root causes behind the AIDS pandemic, it is urgent not only that public health measures of testing, quarantine, and crash-program research for a vaccine and cure be undertaken, but that the resistance levels of the population be raised through better living standards, generated by economic development projects of the type outlined by Peres.