

'Mass Murder By Complacency'

Discussing the Group of Seven countries' response to the AIDS pandemic, UNAIDS envoy to Africa Stephen Lewis insisted that "those who watch the pandemic unfold with a kind of pathological equanimity must be held to account. There may yet come a day when we have peacetime tribunals to deal with this particular version of crimes against humanity."

Speaking to a press briefing at UN headquarters on Jan. 8, Lewis reported that at every stop of his four-country visit in December to Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia, he had been struck by the determination with which the African people and their governments were prepared to do battle against the plague. "I am weary to the point of exasperated impatience, at the endless expressions of doubt about Africa's resolve and Africa's intentions and Africa's capacities. Africans are engaged in endless numbers of initiatives and projects and programs and models which, if taken to scale, if generalized throughout the continent, would halt the pandemic."

He cited, in particular, Zimbabwe—which, "whatever the level of political turbulence, has created a sturdy municipal infrastructure for the purpose of dealing with

AIDS." In Malawi, the government is going to treat free of charge, and deliver anti-retroviral medication through the public health sector to 50,000 people.

Explaining that hunger and AIDS "have come together in a Hecate's brew of horror," Lewis spoke about a visit to the pediatric ward of the University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka, Zambia. "The infants were clustered, stick-thin, three and four to a bed, most so weakened by hunger and ravaged by AIDS that they really had no chance. We were there for 45 minutes; every 15 minutes, another child died, awkwardly covered with a sheet, then removed by a nurse, while the ward was filled with the anguishing weeping of the mothers. A scene from Hell." About the AIDS orphans, he noted that this is a new phenomenon for which the world has no evident solution. "Public health has confronted terrible contagions of communicable disease at other moments in human history. One day the same will be true for AIDS. But we've never before confronted the selective destruction of parents that leaves such a mass of orphans behind." Lewis noted that there is no way to deal with this. "They wander the streets as orphan gangs, bewildered, lonely, disenfranchised from all reality."

Lewis forecast the UN Global Fund for AIDS, launched by Secretary General Kofi Annan in mid-2001, will be in financial crisis after January 2003. And, "If there is a war in Iraq come February, then the war will eclipse every other international human priority, HIV/AIDS included."

2001. Sex workers in Bombay have HIV infection rates of 50%. Studies of migrant workers have found that infection rates for HIV are about 10%.

Taking these factors into account, a realistic estimate of HIV cases in India would range from 11-19 million.

Estimate 5% of Russians by 2005

Russia is experiencing the fastest growing epidemic of HIV in the world. The number of HIV infections has doubled each year since 1997. Conservative estimates put the number of people infected at over 1 million at the end of 2001. The epidemic is ravaging a population whose health has already been weakened by lack of medical care, malnutrition, and the resurgence of multi-drug resistant tuberculosis. The major target of the epidemic so far has been the youth, as 80% of the cases since 1998 have occurred in people under age 29. Large increases in intravenous drug use among the youth, and in the military, have fueled the spread of HIV. In St. Petersburg, there are 17,000 registered cases of HIV infection, but the real number is likely to be closer to 100,000 in this city of 5 million. The number of registered cases increased fourfold between 2000 and 2001. In St. Petersburg, it is esti-

ated that 60-80% of new HIV infections are caused by intravenous drug use and needle sharing.

However, the epidemic is spreading quickly to the general population, and at St. Petersburg's Botkin Hospital, the number of HIV-infected mothers has tripled in the last nine months of 2002, compared to the previous year. The hospital is in such short supply of medications, that patients are instructed to purchase some of their medicines at private pharmacies and bring them to the hospital. Only about 6% of patients infected with HIV can afford adequate treatment, and only about 1% actually get treatment with the latest anti-retroviral drugs. The Russian government spent only \$5 million on national AIDS programs last year.

The situation in Moscow is similar, but there, 15% of sex workers are HIV-infected, and the ratio of infection in men and women is about 2-1. In Leningrad, HIV infection in intravenous drug users has increased tenfold in the past year. The worst is yet to come, as tuberculosis and HIV combine to produce an deadlier dual epidemic. A study by researchers at Imperial College in London predicts that within five years, 5% of the population of Russia will be infected with HIV.

Ukraine has the highest HIV prevalence rate in Europe,