

FOCUS ON HEALTH MINISTERS CONFERENCE

Nearly six million adult Africans have Aids virus

NEARLY 6 million adult Africans have been infected with HIV, an Aids virus. Even if further spread of the virus is successfully stopped, there will still be millions of deaths from the deadly disease in Africa from today's pool of infected adults and millions of orphaned children.

The grim picture was painted here by the World Health Organisation (WHO) general-director, Dr Hiroshi Nakajima, when he spoke at the opening of the fourth ordinary session of the Conference of African Ministers of Health.

More than 50 health ministers from the OAU member states and senior officials from the African region and WHO headquarters in Geneva, attended the conference. The two-day conference which was opened by Swaziland's King Mswati the Third was closed last Thursday by the Kingdom's Prime Minister, Mr Obed Dlamini.

Dr Nakajima said the Aids pandemic had brought a grave and growing challenge to Africa, sparing no country on the continent. "Unlike other sexually transmitted diseases, Aids takes an average of 10 years to develop after a person becomes infected with the HIV virus.

"It's estimated that, already, nearly 6 million adult Africans have been infected with HIV. All these people can be expected to develop Aids, which, unlike other sexually transmitted diseases, is fatal with no known cure.

From our Correspondent

Dr Nakajima stressed the importance of beginning to develop the Aids programmes, while there was still time, to anticipate and plan for coping with the repercussions of the pandemic, which would leave no sector of the economy untouched.

He also joined member states in calling on the international community to intensify its financial and technical assistance in global partnership, partnership.

There was a chance of bringing the Aids pandemic under control. The WHO director-general also noted that an estimated three out of five people in Africa still lack regular access to the most needed essential drugs and vaccine.

He said African countries typically devoted a large percentage of their health budget to supply of drugs in an attempt to combat some of the world's worst health problems.

Unfortunately, he said, much of these precious resources were wasted because of inefficiency and misuse, and the fact that the money was put towards spurious medicines and otherwise used improperly.

"Through training and dissemination of information, the entire infrastructure for the supply of drugs in these countries must be strengthened. "This includes the implementation of national policies, improvement of procurement and distribution systems, introduction of stronger quality assurances measures, and the promotion of the rational use of drugs, Dr Nakajima explained.

He, however, praised African countries for having shown more progress than those of any other continent in adopting the essential drugs concept, and in demonstrating political will towards implementing national drug policies.

"In other words, even if we were to be completely successful in stopping the further spread of HIV, there would still be millions of deaths from Aids

in Africa from today's pool of infected adults, and millions of orphaned children," he said.

Speaking on the prospects for preventing new infections, Dr Nakajima said WHO could not completely stop the spread of infection but could slow it down until effective, affordable drugs and vaccine were available.

So far, the WHO director-general said, the global strategy was to blunt the pandemic, primarily by means of information and education about safer sex, including the use of condoms.

"Given the cultural sensitivities in the area, the main action must be taken by the governments and people concerned. "That is why WHO is helping 44 countries of Africa to develop their national Aids programmes and mobilise the skills and resources necessary to do the job," he said.

The WHO boss called on member states to ensure that these programmes benefited from the highest level of political commitment.