

"Epidemic Out of Control"

Several hundreds of Africa's leading AIDS specialists met in Marseilles (France) from October 18th-21st for a medical conference which produced the latest and most graphic insights into a continent on the brink of despair, says *The Times*. A human tragedy on an almost unimaginable scale is unfolding across the African continent. Potentially far worse than any famine, and certain to take its toll for decades, the AIDS epidemic is out of control.

Already at least two-and-a-half million men, women and children are estimated to be infected with HIV, the human immunodeficiency virus, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), and most of them are doomed to a premature and hideous death. There is no prospect of salvation, no life-saving treatment, no sign of a cure or a vaccine.

AIDS in Africa is essentially a heterosexually transmitted disease, striking hardest at the young, productive and often middle-class people. The social and economic stability of many of the countries may be in jeopardy. As well as producing shortages of doctors, teachers, civil servants, army officers and politicians, there could be an "orphan culture" in which children left behind would have to be cared for by relatives, grand-parents, or the state.

Damage to tourism—because of fears of infection—would further wound economies, while health care costs would spiral.

Political instability in some countries might result from a combination of these factors, leading to civil unrest. So far it has struck 46 African countries, from the **Cote d'Ivoire** in the north-west to the cities and townships of **Kenya** in the east, and suburbs of Johannesburg and Durban in **South Africa**. The A to Z of disaster ranges from **Algeria** to **Zimbabwe**. In some parts of **Uganda** and **Zaire**, one in four adults is believed to be infected with HIV, and one baby in five is born with it. Twice as many women as men are infected in the **Central African Republic**, **Equatorial Guinea** and **Gabon**. Nobody knows the real numbers of casualties, and what figures exist are seen by the WHO as gross underestimates.

In many impoverished African countries, health budgets amount to less than £10 per head per year—and that to cover all of their medical needs, not just AIDS. Small wonder that the only drug known to slow the progress of AIDS—zidovudine, formerly known as AZT—is rarely prescribed. A year's treatment with zidovudine for one patient in Zambia costs the same as for one in Britain—between £2,500 and £3,000.

In a seminar in Abidjan (**Cote d'Ivoire**) on October 13th, which examined the frightening speed with which the virus spread, it was declared that soon half of all African hospitals would

be reserved for AIDS patients. Doctors from 17 Francophone African countries attended the seminar.

The World Health Organisation is pinning its hopes for Africa on the ability of individual countries to launch health education campaigns which discourage promiscuity and advocate the use of condoms.

But the conference in Marseilles will also be one more milestone. Some researchers believe that the greatest efforts must now be devoted to protecting Africa's children—because it is already too late to save their parents.

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