

Feature

Health

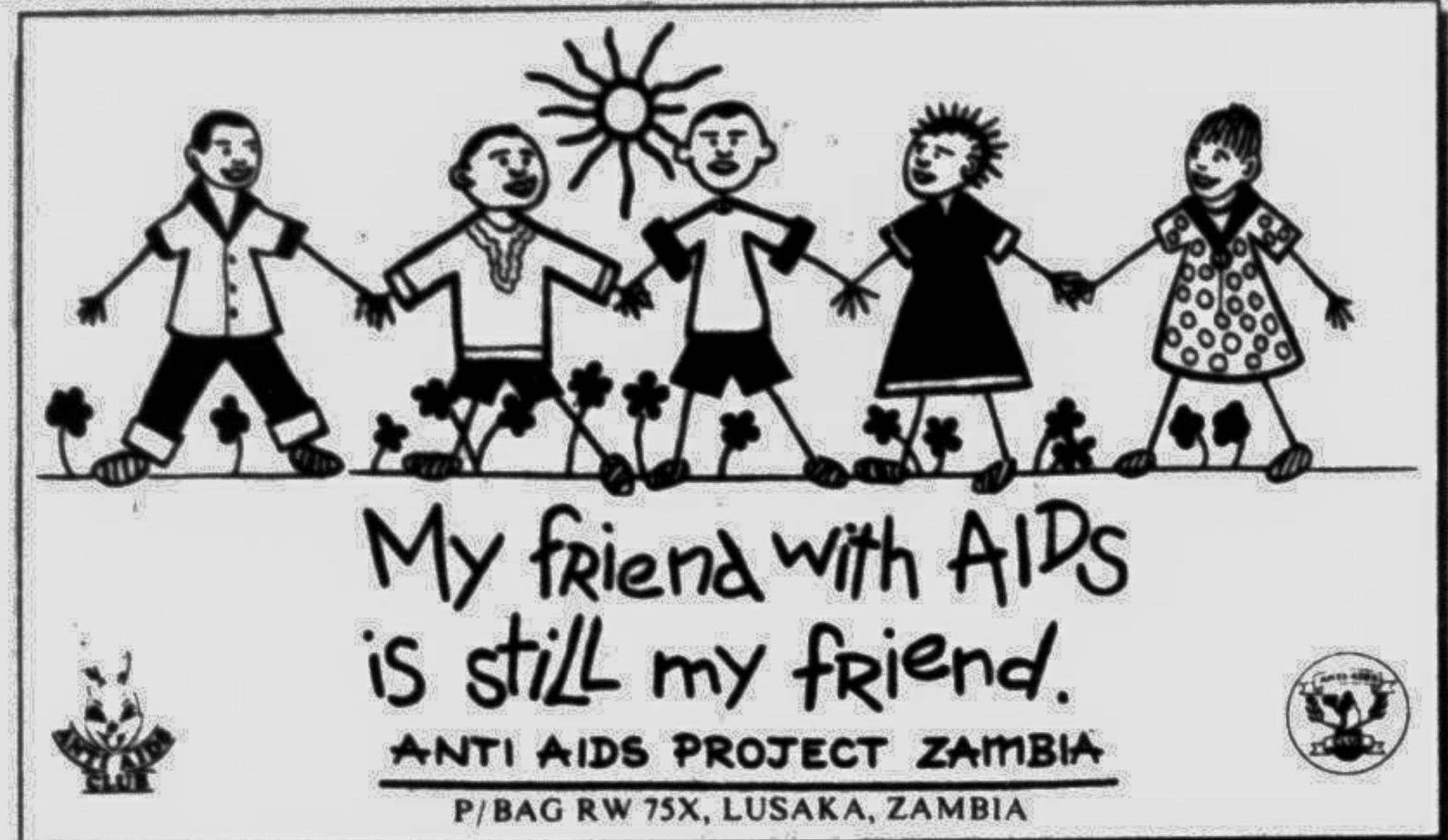
Human Rights Versus Business Interest?

by Daniel Lubinga from Lusaka

The government of Zambia has made enormous increases in its budget for the fight against Aids this year. The epidemic has been acknowledged, but the problem of human rights and the rights of the business community to protect itself from the effects of the deadly disease is proving divisive. The government is trying to pass legislation that will protect those afflicted from discrimination. But, escalating death benefits and medical care costs have led some businesses to fight these protective measures.

THE government of Zambia has increased its budget for the fight against Aids this year almost sevenfold. President Frederick Chiluba told the Aids counselling centre in Lusaka: "Aids has threatened the existence of Zambia... it is killing the most productive age group."

He went on to praise in particular Barclays Bank, whose Aids prevention programme has won international acclaim.



One of Zambia's Aids posters

However, some measures Barclays has taken directly conflict with human rights and constitutional demands.

Government and business in Zambia seem divided over the protection of human rights and the right of the business community to protect itself against the effect of Aids on company performance.

While President Chiluba acknowledges that Aids could wipe out the Zambian nation, his Minister of Legal Affairs, Roger Chongwe, is calling for the enactment of a law that would deal with discrimination against those infected with Aids and Human Immune Virus (HIV), which causes Aids, as well as their spouses.

At an Aids seminar in Lusaka, the minister, who is a human rights activist, said such a law would help to ensure the dignity of HIV-infected persons and encourage a human feeling towards them.

He said he was aware that some parastatals and insurance companies discriminated against HIV patients and warned it was unlawful to deny employment and education opportunities to a person because he or she was an HIV carrier.

Barclays Bank, on the other hand, has in place a policy that precludes the employment of HIV-positive applicants and this clashes with the Chongwe line.

Given the escalating death benefits, medical care costs and human resources lost through Aids, Barclays may have a point. Human rights might have to take a backseat this time around.

Alex Keembe, Barclays per-

sonnel director, revealed that 115 employees had died from Aids since 1987 and that the bank could lose another 44 this year. It was this state of affairs that prompted Barclays to get involved in Aids prevention campaigns.

Keembe added ruefully: "The danger is that the worst hit age group is between 20 and 50 and these are the people we need most. Already nine have died this year in the bank and unless something is done every urgently we are doomed. There will be no business in Zambia."

Chiluba himself has said that if the young generation gets wiped out there will be no production and the nation will suffer serious economic setbacks.

The problems of Aids-related deaths and absenteeism are duplicated in almost all other companies throughout Zambia. The number of notified cases of Aids in Zambia stands at 26,000, according to the Health Ministry. By last September, 1,600 had died.

Data on display at the counselling centre revealed that the number of HIV cases is higher among young women. The highest number of cases were recorded in Lusaka (7,289) and he lowest in Central Province (625). Medical experts are quick to point out that these figures represent only those actually recorded and that there is gross under-reporting, especially in rural areas.

One of the top counsellors at the centre is Winston Zulu, the first Zambian to go public that he was HIV positive. He

founded the Positive and Living Squad (Pals), an HIV and Aids support group.

He said: "I have had two of my brothers taken by Aids. Having gone through all this, I think I have a duty to ensure that no one else goes through this experience. I hope with all my heart that people will listen and take steps to ensure that Aids is prevented from spreading at the rate it is."

Family Health Trust, a non-government organisation, revealed that 12.2 per cent of children were orphaned by Aids in Matero, a high density residential compound west of Lusaka. Director Elizabeth Mataka says children should be given more access to Aids awareness material.

In its training programmes, Barclays Bank now emphasises health and safety in its newsletter, setting up special committees in branches and providing condoms.

At Zambia State Insurance Corporation, the proportion of claims due to Aids has doubled from 9.7 per cent in 1986 to 20.7 per cent in 1991. Many new policies are being taken out by people who expect to claim within a few years.

To counter rising Aids-related claims, the corporation set up in 1988 an Aids reserve fund aimed at protecting the interests of existing policy holders and ensuring that they do not have to subsidise Aids death claims to their disadvantage. All people to be covered are now required to be actively at work.

Pakistan's Ideology Mutes Aids Fight

by Ayesha Khan from Islamabad

AIDS poses a serious threat to the lives of millions of Pakistanis. yet the country is slow to mobilise its resources and launch an effective prevention programme. International experts say an epidemic will develop within five to ten years if the government does not act quickly.

So far the country has 27 screening centres for the Human Immune Virus (HIV), which causes Aids. Statistics from these facilities put the total number of HIV positive cases at 175 from a sample of 270,000. Private studies by doctors in the crowded city of Karachi conclude that 15,000 to 20,000 people may already be infected there alone.

The discrepancy between official and unofficial figures is due to many factors, most of them common to developing countries:

- the government has not yet organised its Aids prevention and control programme well enough to conduct its own studies. It has not tested pools of high-risk and low-risk populations so as to pinpoint the extent and direction of the disease in Pakistan;

- Pakistan's ideological claim to be an Islamic state appears to be hindering the government's ability to admit that Aids exists in Pakistan, and thus to discuss the subject openly;

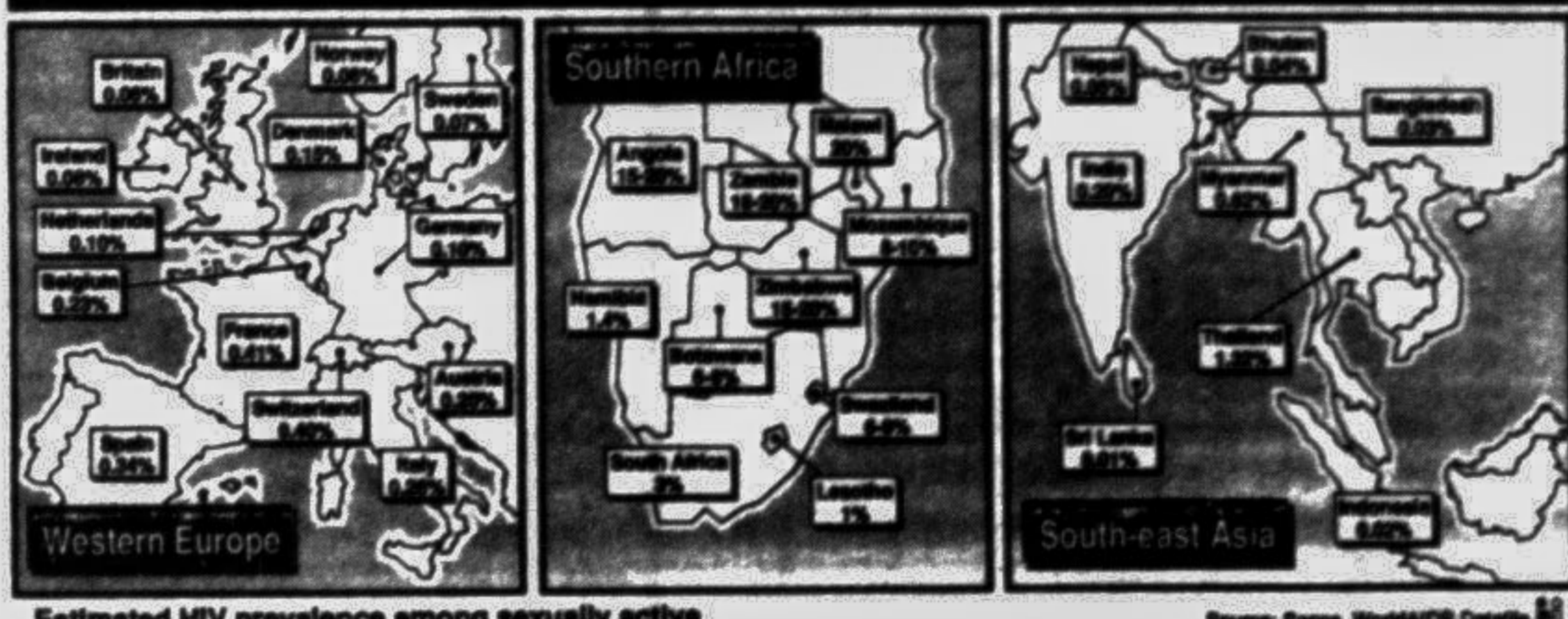
- the government has limited resources to spend on Aids. The existing programme

is largely funded by the World Health Organization. Although the government pays some recurrent expenses, it will not disclose its exact expenditure. One view within the government is that this is because it is afraid of disappointing wealthy donor agencies which expect it to take the lead on its own Aids programme and

in Karachi and reaching out to prostitutes and drug addicts. The group claims the lack of government intervention in these communities stems from a denial that such social ills exist in the first place.

The first Aids patient was discovered in Pakistan in 1988. He was a Tanzanian citizen, confirming beliefs that

Incidence of HIV



Estimated HIV prevalence among sexually active. Source: Paris, WorldAids Centre H.

rely on donors only for supporting funds. The government's educational material on Aids is rarely seen, despite its strong adherence to the official line. One pamphlet's slogan: "Martial relations based on mutual faith according to religious and moral principles are the best protective measures against Aids."

The director of the small National Aids Prevention and Control Programme, Dr Kamran Masood, says: "We are aware of the threat, but I think we are a bit lucky, because Pakistan is a society where Islam is practiced all over, and we have got the teachings of the Koran and Sunnah. The Koran talks very openly about this issue: sticking to the marriage partner, hygienic conditions, and other things."

The government has not allowed an Aids awareness campaign to be run on television, for fear of offending the conservative religious parties. This is largely a political decision. Every government in Pakistan avoids alienating the mullahs' lobby and thereby appearing unfit to fulfil the country's ideological commitment to an Islamic state.

But it is doubtful whether Aids is a disease which can be stopped with euphemisms, and this is why it will penetrate to the heart of Pakistan's mistaken illusions about the kind of society they live in.

As one doctor who conducts Aids awareness sessions for women in a slum outside of Islamabad said: "We should not say that we should act on Islamic teachings. We should tell people the realities — what should be done and what should not be."

Local non-governmental organisations are taking the initiative and talking frankly about Aids within their communities. A tiny Aids Prevention Society is operating

only at foreigners or those marginalised from society. The government promptly demanded that all foreign sailors be screened for HIV on entering the country.

The first indigenous HIV case was diagnosed soon after. He was a drug addict and professional blood donor, which should have sent the government into high alert. However at that time the press simply quoted religious leaders saying Aids was a punishment inflicted on anti-social elements — prostitutes, homosexuals and drug addicts — as punishment for their sins.

Five years later, the government is just beginning to look into the possibility of a safe blood transfusion project. More than half the 1.5 million units of blood transfused each year, often without adequate medical precautions, come from high-risk professional donors. Screening blood for HIV is not required by law.

Private blood banks are a thriving business, depending largely on a no-questions-asked relationship with high-risk donors. It would take a massive coordination effort to bring the 200 private and government blood banks into line. So far there is not much prospect of such an effort being started, although HIV-infected blood has already slipped into the general population, according to some doctors working in Karachi.

Sex outside marriage is a federal offence, punishable under Islamic law. No government would risk launching an open campaign, persuading people to use condoms, choose their sexual partners carefully, and be honest with partners about their own sexual histories. That would be a radical admission that Pakistanis are not any safer from Aids because they are Muslim.

The World Conference on AIDS was held in Berlin, from June 7-11. To mark this occasion Gemini News Service devotes a series features on the world's most deadly disease. We dedicate this issue to the fight against AIDS.

Three faces of Aids



Asia is Being Hit Hard and Fast

by Abby Tan from Manila

THE death from Aids of a pretty 23-year-old Filipino who once worked in bars overseas has pointed to what the World Health Organization (WHO) has called a ticking time-bomb — an explosion of cases in Asia accelerated by mass migration of people looking for work.

Unwed mother Rachel Reyes died six months after the death of her two-year-old son whom she had infected. She told health officials she worked in South Korea and Japan and had once shared a needle when injecting herself with drugs. She did not know for sure how she got Aids. She is now just a statistic.

Virus (HIV), which causes Aids. Officials say that while the spread has stabilised in Europe and the United States, it is growing to epidemic proportions in Asia. Before the year 2000 the WHO estimates 90 per cent of the projected 40 million HIV cases will be in the developing countries of Asia.

Social and religious constraints make the battle against Aids in the Philippines, Asia's only Christian country, hard going. Health Secretary Juan Flavio is fighting to promote condoms for safe sex. But the Roman Catholic Church

disguise to push birth control. The Church forbids all artificial methods of birth control. The Philippines birthrate is 2.48 per cent, one of Asia's highest.

Priests have threatened to deny holy communion to Filipino women wearing an intra-uterine device (IUD). Flavio himself was threatened with ex-communication by a priest during a television interview. He is a wispy man standing 4 feet 11 inches and known for his sense of humour. He brushed the threat aside.

When asked if his conscience was troubled about pushing hard for birth control and Aids prevention, he replied: "Maybe I am a bad Catholic, but I sleep disgustingly well."

Flavio said he was all for the Church's values, but asked: "What do we do now? We don't have the luxury of time. The time to address the Aids problem in the country is now, if not yesterday."

The Philippines has had 86 cases of Aids, of which 63 have proven fatal. It is estimated that about 36,000 people are infected by the virus. The method of survey is to multiply each Aids case by approximately 400 to determine the number of HIV infections.

Flavio warned that if Philippines did not take preventive action it would become like Thailand in five years. Thailand has the highest incidence of Aids in the region — 1,300 cases and 400,000 with the virus. Fifteen per cent of the Philippines' victims were contract workers who had acquired Aids overseas. The Philippines has two million workers abroad, mostly in the Middle East and in the economically booming countries of

East Asia. Half a million people return home every year for holidays or to renew their contracts. They go back to the provinces and infect their families.

The Health Department considered requiring returning workers to take an Aids test. Flavio said this was impractical because it is costly and might infringe their rights.

WIO regional adviser Di George Petersen said poverty in the Philippines and many countries in Asia, which drives people to seek jobs elsewhere, has helped the Aids explosion. He added: "The whole economic development in Asia creates the atmosphere for rapid transmission."

Economic prosperity is bound to lead to a proliferation of the sex industry. Bangkok brothels, for example, recruit young, poor girls from neighbouring Laos, Cambodia, Burma and Southern China.

Petersen called the Aids situation in India and Burma alarming, saying: "In areas where there is no sex equality, where women have less social standing, there is more prostitution. Aids and HIV are connected to poverty. In Asia we're sitting on a time-bomb. Aids came to Asia much later than Europe, yet the growth is faster."

Drug abuse has complicated the situation. The Golden Triangle, where heroin is trafficked from Southern China, Thailand and Burma, is also a focal point in Aids transmission.

The agency reports better success in its anti-Aids campaign in small Pacific countries like Tonga, Fiji and Papua New Guinea. With aid from UNESCO, the school curriculum in those countries now includes Aids education.

Puppets and Films Carry Aids Festival Message

by Francesca Buglioni from Berlin

FILMMAKERS, musicians, theatre artists and writers from all over the world came together in Berlin to perform at the first cultural festival devoted to the theme of Aids.

With this festival, Berlin has mounted a huge public relations exercise costing half a million Deutschmarks, aimed at involving the general public, and to amusing, enthusing and informing all in the cause of better public understanding of Aids and its effects around the world.

The Aids Culture — Cultural Aids festival was organised by Deutsche Aids-Hilfe, Germany's largest non-governmental Aids organisation and the German offices of UNESCO. The main financial support came from Benetton, the fashion company famed for its often controversial advertising.

The event coincided with the 9th International Conference on Aids, also held in Berlin. About 15,000 delegates from 128 countries gathered at the conference with the aim of providing the world Aids community with a venue to share information and experience.

Berlin has just recently mourned its 1,000th Aids-related death. The city has 25,000 cases of the Human Immune Virus (HIV) which causes Aids, and 1,300 Aids patients — about 20 per cent of Germany's Aids patients.

Until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 a blindfold approach in East Germany relegated Aids to the ranks of Western depravity. It was even suggested that the HIV virus was the result of bio-technology experiments by the United States' Central Intelligence Agency. Now, in the reunited Germany, Aids is becoming a sensitive health policy issue in a climate of

economic belt-tightening. Cultural activists worldwide have shown great commitment and resourcefulness in the fight against Aids. In all, 130 events took place in 30 venues. Seven exhibitions included the official festival opening event known as the Quilt Project, which was started in San Francisco in 1987 as a cloth mosaic. Each of the 25,000 cloth panels hold memorabilia collected in memory of a person who died of Aids.

African wood pieces from Zimbabwean sculptor Zephania Thuma, avant-garde video installations and other smaller exhibitions were set up in city bars and cafes. Concerts included Verdi's Requiem and four open-air benefit concerts in Berlin's largest squares. There were 150 screenings in a retrospective of film and video productions dealing with Aids.

Most films on Aids and its associations with sex come from the US, but some important work is also beginning to emerge from the developing world. This is taking time. Film programme director Wieland Speck says: "Although a country like India has the largest film production in the world, its commercial nature and the sensitivity means that this is not a medium which is used. Many governments in Third World countries have been wary of admitting or advertising the Aids problem."

One notable exception is the US-Uganda co-production of the film Born in Africa. It is a portrait of Philly Bongoley Lutaaya, a Ugandan pop star known for his heroic public admission in 1988 that he had Aids. He died a year later after devoting himself to the cause.

The film is a moving portrait of the last months of his

life as he struggled, overcoming his dwindling strength, to help unshackle Aids from the constrictions of taboo-ridden Uganda.

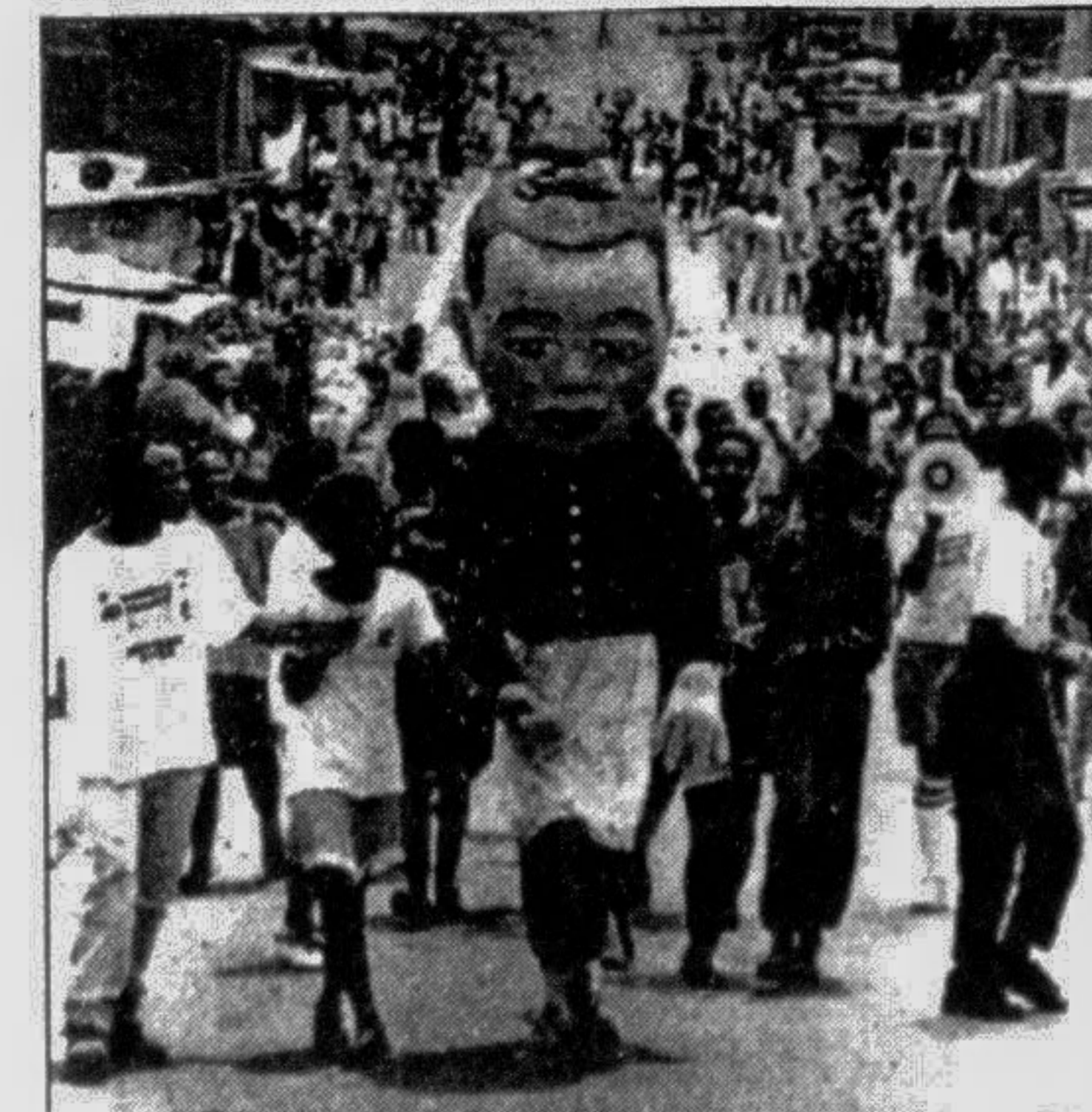
Dr Wiegand-Kanzaki, director of Berlin's largest multicultural arts centre, says: "The strong presence of performers from Third World countries at this festival is an impressive testament to the active role that cultural activists have taken in the struggle to confront Aids."

Among some of the most eagerly awaited performances were those of the Puppets Against Aids from South Africa, Triple MT from Zambia and the Maw Lum Drama

Group from Thailand. These are some of the epicentres of the Aids pandemic, where figures are escalating.

Puppets Against Aids was founded in Johannesburg in 1987. It is run by the African Research and Education Puppetry programme and has been touring South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe, where in some areas the percentage of HIV infection is said to have reached 50 per cent.

When it comes to Aids, say festival organisers, "art is an important element in the fight against the disease because it addresses the social dimension and can help to maintain human dignity."



Puppets Against Aids In South Africa puppets are being used for Aids awareness campaigns. Photo: D.A.H.

HIV/Aids: Restrictions on entry



The WHO Pacific regional office in Manila says 1.5 million people in South and Southeast Asia have the Aids virus. One million were detected only in the last six months. This shows the rate of increase is very fast in Asia. Worldwide, the WHO estimates a total of about 2.5 million Aids cases. Another 12 million infections are estimated for Human Immune

firmly opposes condom use. The very weekend Reyes died, priests railed from their pulpits and read a pastoral letter urging the faithful to adhere to monogamous sexual relationships. They cited the Pope's statement in Aids-ravaged Africa that "chastity is the only proper way" to stop the disease's rampage. The Church suspects Flavio is using Aids prevention as a