

Health

Immunization can Achieve Miracle

by Raffat Binte Rashid

URING the past five years only a single case of whooping cough and diphtheria has been reported to Professor Mansoor Hussain of Pediatric Medicine, Bangladesh Institute of Child Health, Dhaka Shishu Hospital. Such an amazing record was made possible only by the massive Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI) initiatives undertaken. However, despite the remarkable success of EPI in Bangladesh the coverage of fully immunized children under twelve months is still 50 per cent.

About 40 thousand children die everyday around the world and among them one out of every 20 are Bangladeshi. These innocent lives meet their end from easily preventable six childhood diseases like diphtheria, measles, whooping cough, poliomyelitis, tetanus and tuberculosis. Millions of children in the developing world are left crippled, blind or mentally disabled because they are not thoroughly immunized.

Almost one out of six Bangladeshi children discontinue immunization. The latest National Coverage Evaluation Survey, CES '93 — conducted in February reveals that lack of adequate and appropriate information to mothers was the most important factor for failure to complete the immunization series of children. The level of understanding of illiterate rural mothers in Bangladesh should be considered, simply talking to them in general terms about vaccination will make no effect. There should be a face-to-face communication between the mothers and the field workers, whereby the mothers can voice their concerns and clarify their

own why's, when's and how's.

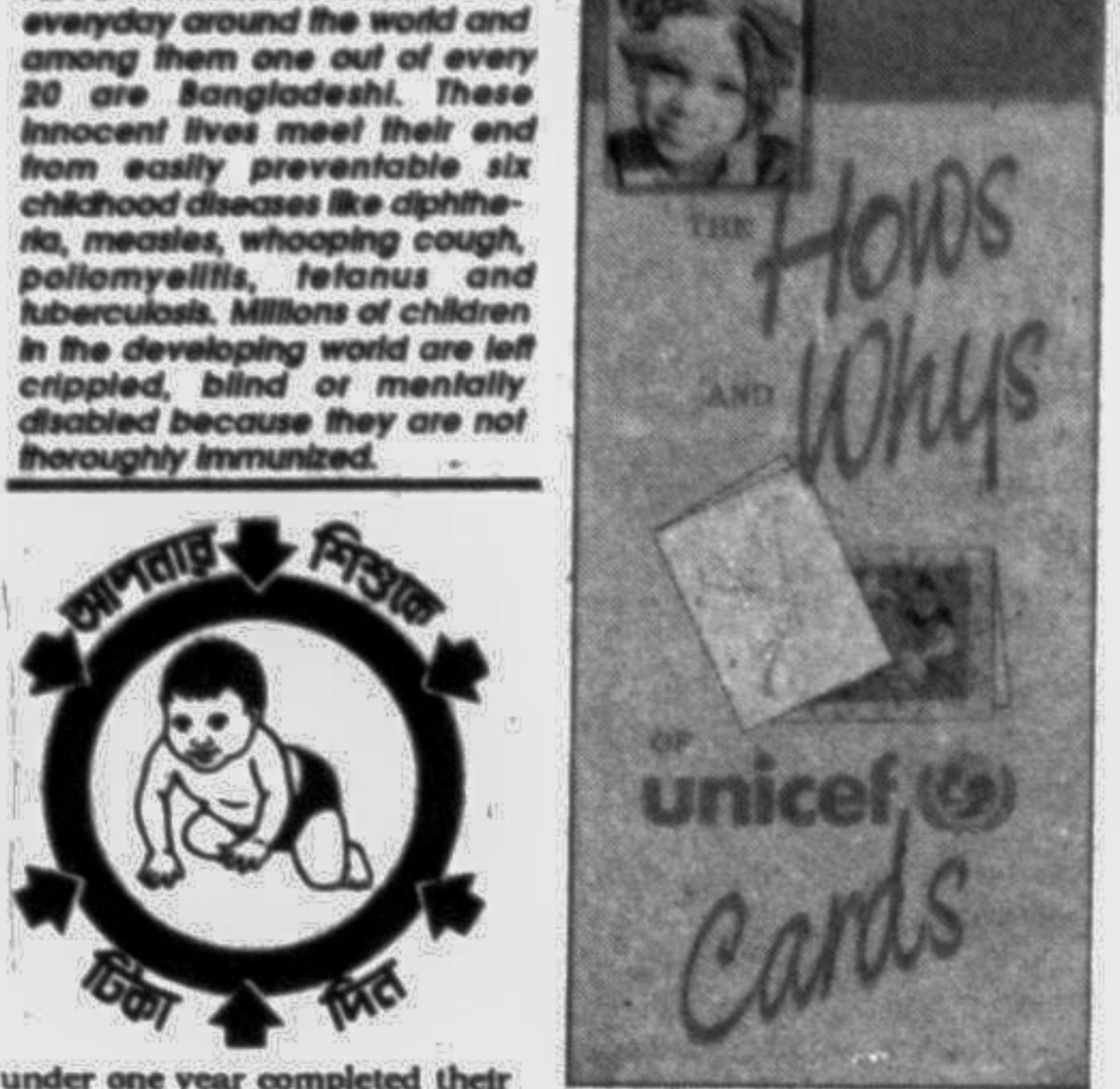
However The Progress Card of Nations published by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) cited Bangladesh's achievement in the EPI as one of the biggest success stories in the last decade. In 1985, barely two per cent of the country's infants were fully immunized. Now seven years later 74 per cent of the children under two years of age and 50 per cent

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under one year completed their immunization schedule, but this goal for Bangladesh has been set up at 84 per cent. However, Bangladesh's rate of full coverage, as measured by the completion of immunization

against measles, at 53 per cent is still well below the South Asian average of 79 per cent. But in general the children vaccinated account for 53 per cent whereas regional average is 79 per cent with the world average at 77 per cent, which ranks Bangladesh in the region as the sixth out of seven nations with data.

Immunization is a word with big potentials for saving lives:



Selling of UNICEF cards have not only generated funds for child development, but have also created mass awareness

as many as five millions every year, in the developing world. UNICEF with other organizations and concerned individuals is working to make immunization available to every new-born child in Asia, Africa and Latin America. UNICEF's concern is for the millions of children throughout the developing world whose basic right to adequate nutrition, health care and education remain unfulfilled.

Now to halve the rate of child deaths and save the lives of up to 20,000 children each day, UNICEF with the help of the media, has chalked out four inexpensive methods. These low-cost techniques if applied could bring about a revolution in child health and survival: they are: growth monitoring, oral rehydration, breast feeding and in-

COLONEL Patrick Lumumba was a civil war hero in Uganda and was one of the victorious National Resistance Army's (NRA) top dozen officers. In 1987, Colonel Lumumba was due to be posted to what was then the Soviet Union for military training. But he needed to test HIV negative before he could go. Colonel Lumumba tested HIV positive. Four years later he was dead.

Colonel Lumumba's story is not unique. Worldwide, many thousands of soldiers are infected with HIV; many hundreds, perhaps thousands, have already died from AIDS.

AIDS

Millions have come into contact with the AIDS virus but remain free of symptoms. Researchers have already learnt that vulnerability to the lethal virus depends at least in part on genes. A team of researchers looked at six combinations of an inherited protein found on some human and human cell surfaces. It concluded that one of the protein combinations makes the people who carry it highly resistant to AIDS, while another makes them highly vulnerable.

Mental Illness

Researchers in Canada have found a possible genetic link to schizophrenia. Other research groups are hot on the trail of genetic markers for certain genetic disorders.

The practicality of such susceptibility tests will depend on whether genes are the main — or even frequent — cause of mental disturbances. Consider Huntington's chorea and Alzheimer's disease, two neurological disorders that usually strike late in life. Huntington's is always caused by a gene, but only an estimated ten per cent of Alzheimer cases have been traced to heredity.

Combat soldiers also have a life and death interest in the HIV status of their comrades-in-arms. On the front line, it is normal practice to give a wounded soldier a blood transfusion "on the hoof" — that is, from the nearest available soldier. Because HIV transmission by blood transfusion is highly efficient, the HIV status of the blood donor is crucial.

Military chiefs of staff, particularly in the United States army, worry about the possibility of an HIV positive soldier having his finger on the nuclear trigger. "It's not a suitable place to put someone who knows they're going to die anyway," a senior US medical officer commented.

A US army medical study speaks ominously about the "cognitive impairment" of American HIV positive soldiers, defined as "inadequate capacity to moderate neurobehavioral consequences of the virus." In other words, soldiers with HIV can behave unpredictably.

Generals in armies like that of Ghana, whose soldiers are often used in UN peace-keeping forces, worry about sending troops who are HIV positive abroad. Instead of bringing peace to a highly-charged political situation, they could be accused of bringing disease.

Soldiers: agents of spread?

Many civilians regard the military as agents for the spread of AIDS. At the 1992 meeting of

munition.

UNICEF as we all know is no charity. Funds are donated by governments, Non-government organizations, corporations and concerned individuals, and also derived from the sale of UNICEF's greeting cards and other gift items.

Pull immunization is a basic right for every child, and by choosing UNICEF products, which are made only for the welfare of the children all over the world, life and hope are given to these innocent ones who normally have none. In fact, what's the price of a miracle? It can be as little as the cost of one pack of UNICEF cards, because proceeds from the sale of these cards can help immunize a child against deadly diseases. Now that's a small price for a child's life.

In 1993 UNICEF marks its 47 years of service to the world's children. It was created in 1946 to provide massive emergency relief to the destitute young victims of World War II. And in 1949, a seven-year-old Czechoslovakian girl Jitka Samukova gave a painting to UNICEF as thanks for the help given to her war-ravaged village. Her design became the first UNICEF card. Now 37 years later, people in 145 countries including Bangladesh are playing vital role in ensuring that such life-saving programmes continue. These cards are sold in 145 countries and all designs are donated by prominent international artists. Children in 128 developing countries are benefited by the proceeds of such sales.

Whenever we choose cards or gifts for our loved ones, we prefer to make the best choice, because by giving we show that we care. UNICEF cards carry two meanings: infact, we are giving twice, to someone close to us and to a needy child. Their survival depends on our choice. As the advertisement says "there are millions of reasons to buy UNICEF cards . . . and all of them are children."

And what could be more delightful than helping the children of the world to live a healthy happy life.

"Aparn Shishuke Tika Din" (immunize your child); at least a small gesture can help bring smiles to eight to nine lakh families in Bangladesh and at the same time it means medicine, school books or clean water and vaccination to the world's children including Bangladeshi in desperate need.

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the British have grown up believing they know all about healthy eating. Since the rise of industrialisation, food has always been abundant and there has been relatively little concern about children growing up malnourished.

Lately, doctors, and nutrition scientists have been paying much attention to how the rewards of affluence bring the diseases of affluence — cancer, heart disease, obesity. The industrialized nations are discovering that when it comes to eating right, they have not always known best.

It has been a gradual change. For centuries, religion and philosophy both played major roles in teaching people what they should eat, but the science of nutrition began only in the early 19th Century. And up until a few decades ago, nutrition science was concerned primarily with the effect of under-nutrition on people's health.

Nutritionists focused their research on the nutrients — vitamins and minerals — in people's diets, and thought that as long as people are not undernourished, they should be healthy. Popular wisdom said "You really can't get too much of a good thing," and people took that philosophy to heart, figuratively and literally.

As the rates of death from heart disease soared following World War Two, researchers began to wonder if there might not be a link between eating certain types of foods and the incidence of heart disease and some cancers.

Once this sort of research began, it soon became clear that most Britons were eating too much of the wrong kinds of food — meat, fried ready-made foods bought from street vendors and fast-food outlets, refined sugar, and alcohol.

Consuming too much of these things makes for diet very high in fat, and such a diet is now widely believed to be the major cause of death from cardiovascular disease.

And research continues on how the fat content in the average British diet may be responsible for causing certain types of cancer. Fat has become the thing Britons are told to avoid like the plague. That means red meat, something most Britons grew up seeing on their plates at least once a day, animal products like butter, and concentrated sugars are now seen to be major health risks if eaten in excess.

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Diet of the Poor Heals the West

Frances Misutka writes from London

lots of fibre and fibre-rich carbohydrates like brown rice, pasta, beans, pulses, lentils and cereals.

People are being encouraged to get more of their protein from fish and soybeans instead of red meat — more of those foods they had come to think of as poor people's food.

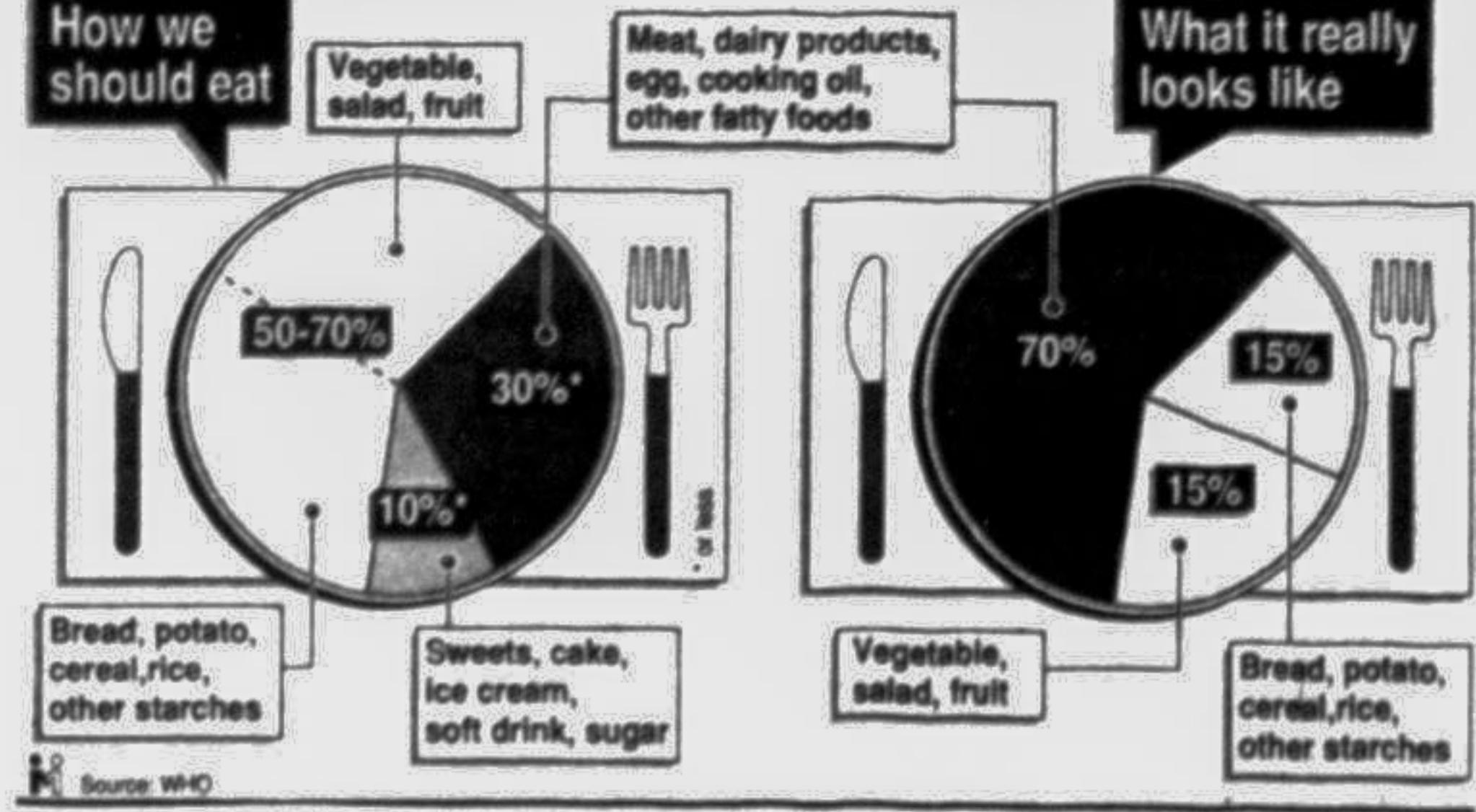
This pattern of disease wrought by affluence is a predictable one, says Carol Timperley, of Britain's Vegetarian Society. "It's a common pattern that you see, not only in Britain or other developed countries, but even in the lesser-developed countries as their standard of living starts to

cause of poor diet, but it's only one cause."

Still, availability is probably not a bad place to start, considering what is available is seemingly endless supply of enticing sugar and fat-laden merchandise. The average British grocery store is jammed with endless varieties of meat, as well as ice creams, cakes, cookies, jams, jellies, pudding, in an abundant display that would stagger the imaginations of people in many less developed nations.

These are, quite literally, the rewards of affluence, the things with which mothers reward their children for good be-

Diet: right vs. reality



improve. A refined diet, with lots of refined sugar and meat and such, is a traditional sign of prosperity."

Now that Britons are bearing that there is a price to be paid for all this prosperity, many are starting to simplify their diets. A 1991 survey by the University of Bradford estimated there were about 3.6 million adult vegetarians in Britain. That was a rise of 94 per cent over a 1990 survey.

Other studies suggest that the number of people who are not completely vegetarian but who avoid red meat has grown to about eight million. Timperley says the most common reasons for making the switch are that people are concerned about heart disease, cruelty to animals, and addi-

tion and adults reward themselves after a hard day at the office.

Some food manufacturers are making products with a lower fat content. Labels boast "No fat," or "Low fat." But nutritionists say customers should not put total faith in these products. Cullem says: "People still have to take a look at the total fat content of their diet, and sometimes, eating a few products that are low in fat isn't going to make that much difference to a person's total fat intake."

"In fact, some studies have shown that people eating these lower-fat products are actually consuming more fat at the end of the day, because they think if a product says 'low fat' they can eat bigger amounts of it."

fruits are required to be HIV negative on entry to the army. By the end of September 1989 over 2.3 million civilian applicants for the military had been tested, with 3,014 testing HIV positive. This gives an overall rate of just 0.131 per cent. But broken down in terms of ethnicity, a different figure is revealed. Among black American applicants, the rate of HIV infection was, at 0.37 per cent, nearly three times higher.

Ghana compulsorily tests each of its 12,000 soldiers annually. In Uganda, where the army does not have the financial or medical resources for systematic, compulsory testing of either recruits or serving soldiers, HIV testing is done on an anonymous, voluntary basis with pre-and post-test counseling. The only exception to this rule are NRA soldiers sent abroad for military "Combat Readiness, Condom Readiness" reads one of the graphic anti-AIDS posters that plaster Ghana's army barracks. All the posters use military jargon and are designed to convey the message of armed readiness against AIDS.

Scientists in Angola concluded that "people displaced, mainly as a consequence of war, certainly play an important role in spreading HIV infection from the northern frontier areas of the country to the central and southern re-

AIDS and the Military

by Rex Winsbury

The British Association for the Advancement of Science, Sir Donald Acheson, former Chief Medical Officer to the UK government, warned that war — "particularly the slow-burning anarchic disturbances currently so prevalent" — was an important factor in the spread of HIV in Africa (see "Mozambique: HIV positive", p. 11).

According to Dr Andrew Cliff of Cambridge University, computer analysis of AIDS in Uganda demonstrates that the "classic association between war and disease substantially accounts for the presently observed geographical distribution of reported clinical AIDS cases in Uganda" [2]. Military conflict

is also the problem: "the US army pioneered an open policy on HIV among its soldiers and has published numerous epidemiological and medical studies of the ramifications of HIV in its ranks. By contrast, any attempt to elicit information on HIV policy and practice within the British armed forces meets with a wall of silence: no statistics are available.

The extent of the problem

Uganda has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in the world and its army, the NRA, recognised as early as 1987 that it had a serious and probably unique problem with AIDS.

The NRA estimates that HIV prevalence in its ranks could be as high as 20%.

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In Rwanda, some 12% of

army recruits were found to be suffering from a variety of sexually-transmitted diseases such as urethritis — an alarming statistic in view of the close links between untreated STDs and HIV.

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