

## Feature

## Health

## Unitedly Combating a Curse called AIDS

by Md Anowarul Islam Khan

**T**he human civilization is exposed to the threat of HIV/AIDS pandemic all over the world. Since a single case of AIDS had been detected in the United States of America in 1981, the disease had begun to be transmitted elsewhere in the world. The scientists have named the deadly disease as Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) which causes due to entry of Human Immune Deficiency Virus (HIV) into the human system. The virus is so fatal that it destroys total immunity of the body leading the infected person towards unavoidable death in a certain period of time.

The human system has received into it a natural immunity mechanism to fight against diseases. But the opportunistic HIV/AIDS virus is very much potential to completely damage the protective cells of the body and as a result the infected person becomes vulnerable to any kind of illness which could not be cured. The most important and serious characteristics of this disease is that AIDS becomes apparent after 8-10 years after having been infected with HIV. It is quite fearsome that during this long incubation period the infected person may seem to be healthy and can lead normal productive and social life without showing any clinical symptoms and complaints.

This silent manifestation of the disease is very much likely to transmit itself into others without leaving any scope for protection or prevention. Once some specific clinical symptoms like constant diarrhoea, prolonged cold and fever, night sweats, severe weight loss and cancer in different parts of the body begins to appear, the patient can hardly survive for two or three years.

It is surprising and frustrating that neither a vaccine nor any medical treatment for AIDS related health problems could have been developed. Worldwide continuous efforts are being made by the scientists but very little so far have been achieved in this field. This inability or the scientific and medical failure to develop a cure has made an opportunity for the virus (HIV) to spread all over the world.

The global HIV/AIDS situation has become a matter of great concern for the survival of human kind as a whole. It has been estimated that about 14 million people around the world have been infected with HIV. It

is painful to note that about 50 lacs of women and 10 lacs of children throughout the globe by this time, have been infected with this malady.

The tragedy is that by the year 2000 AD, 50-100 lacs of children will be infected with HIV. In the sub-Saharan region the most tragic victims of HIV/AIDS are the women and children. As a result of immaturity death of parents who had suffered from AIDS about 50-100 lacs of orphan children have created a sense of great concern in every sphere of life. At the time when about 100 lacs people will again die of AIDS by 2000 AD many more children will again become orphan. It may be speculated that the death rate will exceed the present population growth rate if it continues to increase in such an alarming way.

**I**t has been well understood and recognised that a comprehensive AIDS prevention and control programme has to be carried out in the country. In the absence of any cure or antidote, education is the only weapon to fight against AIDS. The people at large, therefore, have to be very well informed about AIDS so that they can involve themselves in the AIDS prevention and control programme.

The deadly AIDS virus follows some specific mode of transmission which are closely associated with human behaviour. The environment has very little scope to help the virus to be transmitted unlike other communicable diseases. Human kind is known as the only carrier of AIDS virus. The virus is mostly transmitted through sexual contacts with HIV infected persons and also through homosexual relations with any infected male partners.

It is statistically proved that up till now 80 per cent of HIV/AIDS infections have occurred as a result of sexual promiscuity. The virus can also be transmitted through HIV infected blood transfusion and use of infected needles and syringe. The other mode of transmission is from HIV infected mother to her unborn child during pregnancy, during delivery and even after delivery, through breast feeding. There is no other known way for the virus to be transmitted into human body.

Bangladesh is no more free this ghastly disease from 21 HIV/AIDS positive cases were recorded during the last few

years. There might be more HIV-positive cases still unnoticed and therefore, untreated, which could not be detected due to lack of extensive surveillance and sufficient blood screening mechanism in the country. In the neighbouring India, Burma and Thailand HIV/AIDS epidemic has posed to be very alarming where millions have already been infected with the fatal disease. This situation has become a potential threat to us because of our close social, political and economic relationships with those countries. We must learn from these countries and start preparing to fight the menacing disease without any further delay.

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The absence of any cure or antidote, education is the only weapon to fight against AIDS. The people at large, therefore, have to be very well informed about AIDS so that they can involve themselves in the AIDS prevention and control programme. We need to be very careful and committed in carrying out AIDS prevention activities without disturbing psychosocial sentiment of our society. Discrimination and complicity should not be there if we really want to save our people from this terminal disease. At this point collective and coordinated efforts both within and outside health sectors are to be stimulated in creating a mass awareness about this disease. Health professionals at all levels must be prepared with adequate knowledge and information on AIDS as well as with appropriate programmatic concepts to address the target group timely, adequately and effectively. This should be treated as one of the top priority health problem. The existing health care network system has to be rightly identified and entrusted with the responsibility of AIDS education and information, and

thus resource limitations would not become a serious problem in tackling the disease.

A number of other development agencies are closely working with the people. Educational institutions starting from secondary to post-graduate levels needs to be organised and involved in the movement of AIDS education to safeguard the future generation. There is an ample opportunity for the teachers and students to know about AIDS and pass this vital knowledge on to other members of the community, industries, banks, business establishments, government and non-government agencies and the mass media also have to take part in the AIDS prevention programme using their own mechanism and resources to fight this evil cause.

An effective national policy on AIDS programme input and output, operational strategy, effective implementation and ensuring peoples' participation etc. have not come into being as yet. A series of activities are going on by different government and non-government agencies without specific objective and coordination. The terms of reference of National AIDS Committee and its sub-committee are yet to be known by the concerned organisations and at the same time by the beneficiaries to become a potential partner in AIDS prevention programme. There is no scope for us to give room to any gaps and lapses in the planning and implementation of AIDS prevention programme that demands a high quality administrative lay-out, managerial capability, feasible network and patriotic political commitment.

The study, Agriculture: Toward 2010, looks at the problem of feeding people and focuses on developing countries. World per capita food supplies are 18 per cent above what they were 30 years ago. Progress has been slow and uneven. While most developing countries have been part of this progress, sub-Saharan Africa is worse off nutritionally than it was three decades ago. Even though the percentage of chronically undernourished people has decreased, the overall number has remained constant because of world population growth.

So, in absolute numbers, there are today 800 million hungry people on earth and in year 2010 that number will still total 650 million.

That is the reality Jacques Diouf will inherit on January 1 when he becomes the new director-general of the FAO in place of Edouard Saouma, who held the post for 18 years. Diouf has been Senegalese ambassador to the UN since 1991 and has a PhD in agricultural economics from the Sorbonne in Paris. He is the first African elected to head the organisation.

In his acceptance speech at

## The Big Task that Faces New Man at FAO

Nancy Hart writes from Rome

**A** United Nations study has asked: Will there be enough food for the people of the world to eat in the year 2010? Its simple answer: Yes.

However, answers to questions about the future of the world are never so simple. Yes, there will be enough food to eat, but, no, it will not be distributed adequately around the world. The reasons include poverty, population growth, exploitation of natural resources and war.

Nikos Alexandratos, head of the team from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which edited the study, says: "There are many who think that the world is on a path to destruction.

They see the world population in poverty without enough access to food and fear that as the population grows more will become chronically undernourished. But the world is not coming to an end — not on the food front."

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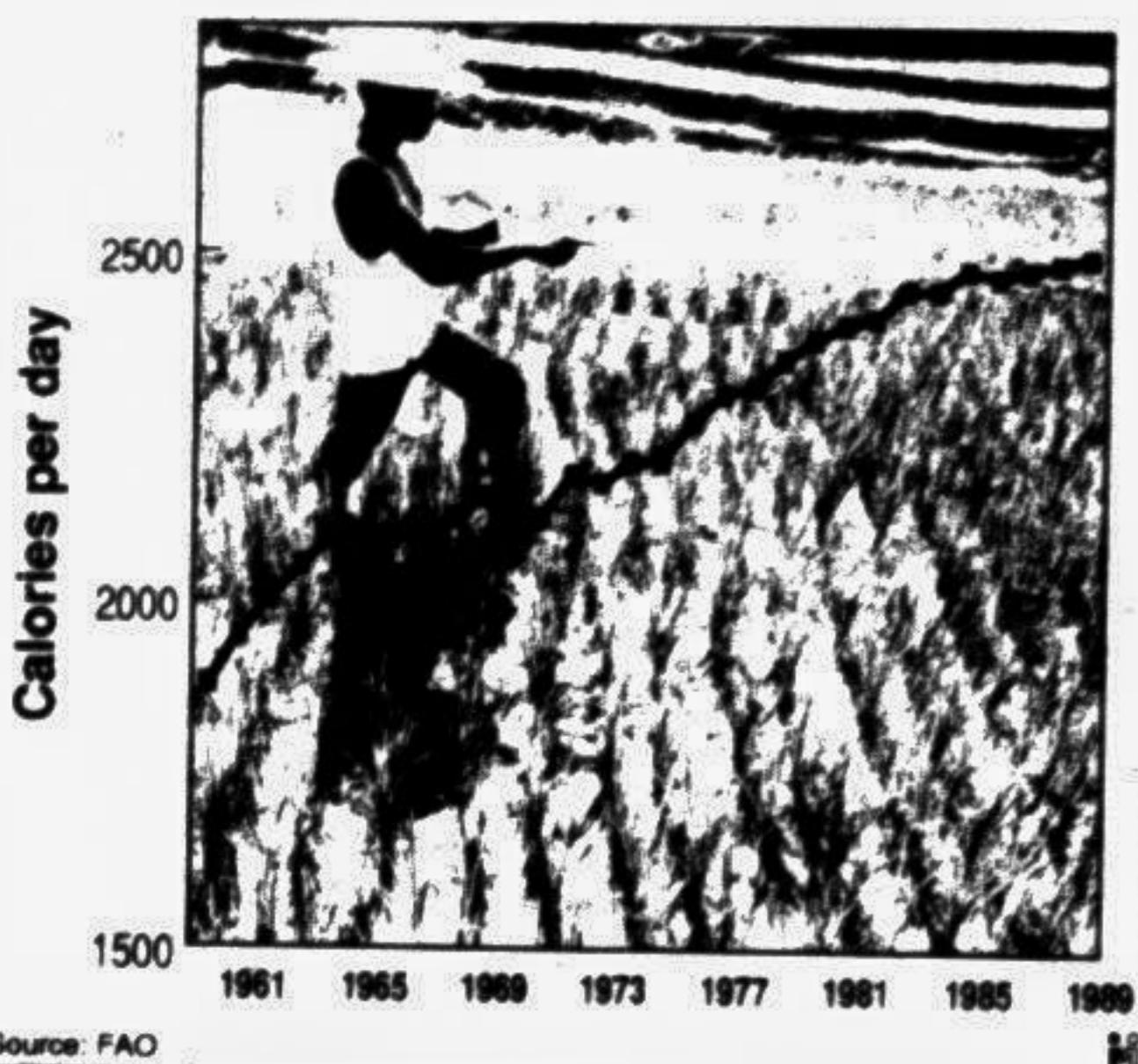
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**S**low road to better nutrition

Developing countries, per capita food supply



the 27th FAO Biennial Conference, Diouf said that although he was supported by African member nations, he has a "firm and unwavering intention" to serve the entire international community and bring all 169 FAO member nations together "to meet the biggest challenge facing mankind, which is the challenge of hunger."

In the last 10 years many countries have been economically stagnant. All developing regions had falls in per capita incomes — except for Asia — which has translated into reduced food and medicine and increased death rates. Diouf said: "In developing countries, failure to grow means failure to have hospitals or schools or basic services. In Europe or North America, failure to grow means they don't sell as many automobiles."

The FAO report predicts that the growth rate of world agricultural production will be lower in the next 20 years — down from 2.3 per cent to 1.8 per cent.

Part of the drop can be explained by countries that already have all the food they need, which means the agriculture market in those countries is unlikely to grow. Also, the pace of increase in the world's population has slowed.

Poverty plays a big role in reduced agricultural produc-

tion. People who would consume more food do not have enough money to buy it, so farmers do not increase production because the increased demand comes from the poor who cannot afford to buy.

"It is not a food problem, it is a poverty problem," Alexandratos said.

In terms of nutrition, the FAO study predicts that by the year 2010, the Middle East and North African region as well as East Asia — including China — and the Latin America-Caribbean region will be above the 3,000-calorie-a-day per person mark. That is significant progress. The 1993 World Development Report from the World Bank said 2,200 calories per day is an energy intake adequate for only light physical activity.

The FAO study said South Asia may also make significant progress by 2010, but not enough. Sub-Saharan Africa, where 32 per cent of the population is undernourished, will continue to have a chronic problem.

Many other factors have to be considered when looking at the ability of the world to feed itself. World population may be growing more slowly, but it is still increasing — from 3.7 billion in 1970 to 5.3 billion in 1990 and predicted 7.2 billion by 2010. Some 94 per cent of that growth is in developing countries.

The process of enabling people to have more food also has impacts. People work in industry, consume more energy, putting pressure on the environment. In future, particularly in developing countries, the environment will pay a price for increasingly intensive agriculture.

Now, as Agriculture: Toward 2010 points out, the crucial issue is whether the world can make the transition to slow growth on a global scale and at the same time eliminate the poverty and undernutrition that remains chronic in the developing world.

**NANCY HART** is an America journalist based in Italy. She has 25 years experience working for newspapers and television stations in the US.

## Dioxin Does Cause Cancer in Humans

by Peter Montague

**A**n explosion at a Hoffmann-LaRoche chemical plant in Seveso, Italy, in 1976 sent a cloud of the herbicide 2,4,5-T over the surrounding countryside, contaminating several thousand people. Dioxin is created as an unwanted by-product during the manufacture of 2,4,5-T, so the Seveso population was exposed to dioxin. That is the reality Jacques Diouf will inherit on January 1 when he becomes the new director-general of the FAO in place of Edouard Saouma, who held the post for 18 years. Diouf has been Senegalese ambassador to the UN since 1991 and has a PhD in agricultural economics from the Sorbonne in Paris. He is the first African elected to head the organisation.

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tion. The Monsantos studies have been criticised by a report from the National Research Council, which says Monsantos studies were "plagued with errors in classification of exposed and unexposed groups, according to some reports, and hence have been biased toward a finding of no effect". A 1990 analysis of Monsantos workers, conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, reported a statistically significant increase in soft tissue sarcomas.

As part of its multi-year scientific reassessment of dioxin, EPA recently published a draft review of all scientific data linking dioxin to cancer and other health effects in humans. The EPA's draft document concludes that four separate studies of workers exposed to dioxin have revealed an "overall increased cancer deaths among exposed workers. However, the Monsanto studies have been criticised by a report from the National Research Council, which says Monsantos studies were "plagued with errors in classification of exposed and unexposed groups, according to some reports, and hence have been biased toward a finding of no effect". A 1990 analysis of Monsantos workers, conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, reported a statistically significant increase in soft tissue sarcomas.

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The area around Seveso has been divided into three zones, called A, B and R. The small A zone was most heavily contaminated, but its 724 residents

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significant cancer increases have occurred. In zone R one kind of cancer has increased: soft tissue sarcoma. Previous studies had linked dioxin exposure to soft tissue sarcoma in humans.

In zone B, among women there has been an observable increase in cancers of the gallbladder and biliary tract (the system that delivers bile from the liver to the small intestine, and in cancers related to the blood-forming system (multiple myeloma and myeloid leukaemia).

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This new study only covers

the period 1976 (through 1986 — 10 years after the Seveso ac-

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