

AIDS

A Terrible Threat

by Shahjahan Mian

SIX UN agencies — UNDP, UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO and World Bank decided in January last to jointly start an AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) programme to prevent the global spread of the deadly disease. The purpose of the UNAIDS is to help and assist the national and global programme for prevention of the outbreak of AIDS.

The UNAIDS programme was formally launched in Bangladesh at a function held on May 8 at the National Press Club. Local experts and representatives from the six UN agencies who participated in its said that although AIDS had not spread extensively in Bangladesh as yet, all the conditions favourable for its outbreak existed here. They laid stress on wide publicity programme to create public awareness about the disease.

The UNDP President Representative in Bangladesh Ms Eimi Watanabe said the number of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) infected people in the world will soar to four crore in the next five years and 90 per cent of them will be in the developing countries. The number of AIDS affected people in the world stood at two crore till 1995. Of them, 50 lakh have already died. Earlier, Associate Director of the World Health Organisation's Global Programme on AIDS Dr. Peter Piot in a report presented at the Asian Health Ministers' meeting held in Dhaka in November 1993 said that one crore 40 lakh people including 10 lakh children were afflicted with HIV up to July 1993. The statistics given by Ms Watanabe and Mr Piot show that in only two-and-a-half years, 60 lakh people were infected with AIDS virus. This gives us an idea about the dreadfulness of the disease and the horrifying speed with which AIDS spreads.

Ms Watanabe said Bangladesh Government estimates put the number of AIDS virus victims at 44 in the country. Of them, three are already dead. She, however, said the actual figure would be much higher. The prevalent

conditions including abject poverty, venereal disease and drug-addiction among the adolescents and youths are very conducive to the spread of AIDS in Bangladesh. Asia is the most vulnerable place in the world at present. Although Africa is on top in the infection rate of AIDS virus. Asia will surpass Africa because of the quick spread of the disease. The rate of HIV infection is highest mostly among the illiterate, neglected and helpless poor women and most Asian women fall in this category. Little over 300 people every hour, and over seven-and-a-half thousand daily, get infected with HIV in the world.

HIV infected people have been found in great number in neighbouring India, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Singapore. With the ticking away of time, the intensity and severity of the disease is assuming an alarming magnitude. Generally, AIDS virus spreads through hetero-sexuality and inadvertent transfusion of blood from the AIDS afflicted persons to patients of other disease needing blood. Fortunately enough, HIV is not infected through external contact like that of cholera, pox, yellow fever and influenza etc. Otherwise, the world would have run the risk of becoming desolate of human population in about 17 years after AIDS virus was discovered in the late 70s.

No coordinated effort has been made to stop spread of the disease in Bangladesh. The first AIDS patient was detected in the country about seven years back after an AIDS patient returned home from a Middle Eastern country and died subsequently. After that two more similar patients who came back home also died.

All will be an exercise in futility if no programme is taken up before an outbreak of the disease in the country. The entire population of the country will be at risk if, God forbid the disease assumes a pandemic height. The menace has to be faced with measures

taken on war footing.

Moreover, we don't really know how many people are now affected with the disease. No one can say it firmly whether it is only 44 as was said by the government, or it is 44 hundred! Because, there is no sincere effort nor there is any effective system to determine the figure. And for that reason one estimate also puts the number of HIV infected people in Bangladesh at 20,000!

The Chairman of the AIDS Technical Committee Major General (Retd) M R Chowdhury told the May 8 meeting that there may be an AIDS epidemic in Bangladesh. He said there are 23 lakh venereal disease patients in the country. Of them, 70 per cent are students. The statistics put forward by General Chowdhury gives us a broad hint about our youths' illegal sexual contacts.

AIDS has spread alarmingly in Thailand and India. The brothels there are depots of AIDS-afflicted prostitutes.

Thailand has eight lakh and India at least five lakh HIV positive people.

About 15 lakh people from Bangladesh work abroad and over 70 thousand Bangladeshi go abroad every year on employment. About 50 thousand visit India and over 10 thousand go to Thailand, Singapore, Nepal and other foreign countries every year on business and recreational purpose. Some also go on official visit.

The suggestion might sound very rude though, the authorities should give serious thought about screening blood of those returning home after a long time. If, unfortunately, anyone is found HIV positive, appropriate measures can be taken and members of his or her family can also be made aware of the fact. If no effective steps are taken to stop the spread of the most dreaded disease, the country may be in danger. So, we should play our part of build an AIDS-free Bangladesh with the help and assistance from UNAIDS in the country.

Secondly, many patients, particularly during operation, need blood. Before transfusion, blood should be checked to be sure that it is HIV-free.

Thirdly, some write-ups on the dreadfulness of AIDS and ill-effects of other addictions may be included in the syllabus of the students from class nine onwards to make them conscious of the curse of these vices.

In all considerations, all out resistance and prevention of AIDS have become very urgent.

Every body in the society expects the government and authorities to take immediate and appropriate measures to stop any spread of AIDS in the country.

Bangladesh at Crossroads

by Mahbubuddin Chowdhury

infected while living abroad. Migrant workers in particular, who may spend several years away from friends and family, may seek comfort from other sexual partners male or female. They may then contract HIV and return to pass the virus on to their wives or other women. Because men who have become infected in Bangladesh or abroad can transmit HIV to their wives, but women who have been sleeping with one person all their lives are nonetheless at risk of infection.

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injection of drugs. A huge portion of Bangladeshi youths are drug addicts. Therefore the chances of HIV transmission through illegal drug use in Bangladesh continue to grow. Besides youths, women are at great risk of infection than men. Some NGOs have programmes informing women about STDs and AIDS with their concerted efforts currently directed towards prostitutes. The women's wing of the National AIDS Committee runs similar programmes on a limited scale. It is believed that a national effort similar to that of family planning, using the experience and resources of family planning workers, can prevent a major HIV/AIDS epidemic in Bangladesh. Because there is still no cure, no vaccine and no long-term treatment for HIV/AIDS, experts agree that the only means of limiting further spread of the virus is widespread information.

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