



During emergencies the so-called blood banks, which are largely unregistered or have no formal affiliation with the government, sell blood for Tk 500 to as high as Tk 1000 a bag of 500 ml to patients needing surgery. Most such commercial blood comes without any screening. Many donors are intravenous drug users who sell blood to buy drugs.

PHOTO: ZAHEDUL IKHAN



Street children with no parental protection are always exposed to unprotected sex, whether voluntary or forced.

not have time or place for counselling and so they continue to engage in unprotected sex.

Surveys show that IDUs do not bother to buy a second syringe to push drugs. A single needle has multiple users. "I cannot afford to buy another syringe. If I had enough money I would buy another ampoule of pethidine to enjoy," said Mahbub, (not his real name) living in a residential dormitory of Dhaka University.

The most frightening thing about the spread of HIV infection is that about 80 per cent blood donors are 'professional' donors and evidence shows that little less than one per cent of them have HIV infection and the trend shows that the percentage is rising.

During emergencies the so-called blood banks, which are largely unregistered or have no formal affiliation with the government, sell blood for Tk 500 to as high as Tk 1000 a bag of 500 ml to patients needing surgery. Most such commercial blood comes without any screening. Many donors are intravenous drug users who sell blood to buy drugs.

About three years ago, the blood banks managed by the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society started screening all bags of blood from voluntary donations for four diseases including STI and HIV infection. The authority maintains that until now they have had no blood that has tested positive for HIV virus but sources inside the labo-

ratory says the infection rate is well below 0.001 per cent.

The national blood transfusion programme, which has now over one hundred blood preservation and collection centres across the country in various district hospitals and medical colleges, unofficially says that screening for HIV infection shows about 0.02 per cent prevalence.

All these factors put together eerily resemble high HIV prevalence countries in Africa such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Mozambique and Zambia.

"The fact remains that the Bangladesh government still believes that HIV infection is low but what about the general population?" asks an expert.

Many countries require people to get mandatory testing for HIV infection before travelling but those returning from countries with high HIV prevalence have no arrangement for voluntary counselling which is most urgently required in the present scenario. There is evidence of high rates of HIV transmissions to wives from their husbands after their return from mostly Middle Eastern countries.

"We must meet the challenge of expanding access to HIV treatment. The government has no arrangements to provide treatment even for opportunistic infection to people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) although we have more than 300 AIDS patients," says a physician of BSMMUH.