

Subcontinent a major worry in AIDS pandemic: UN

AFP, Geneva

The Indian subcontinent is a major cause of concern in the global AIDS epidemic, with India alone accounting for two-thirds of HIV cases in the whole of Asia, according to a new report by the United Nations released yesterday.

The world's second-most populous nation has overtaken South Africa as the country with the most people living with the HIV virus, the specialised agency UNAIDS said.

An estimated 5.7 million Indians

were infected by the end of 2005, the Geneva-based body said in its biennial study of the global epidemic.

That compared with an estimated 5.5 million people in South Africa, which is grappling with one of the highest infection rates per capita in Africa, the hardest-hit continent, said UNAIDS.

However, India's overall rate of adult infections paled compared to South Africa's because of the relative size of the population of the two countries.

While 18.8 percent of South

African adults were living with HIV, the figure in India was 0.9 percent.

Overall, Indian HIV cases accounted for two-thirds of Asia's total.

Estimates of total deaths in India since AIDS was first identified globally in 1981 range from 270,000 to 680,000.

Most of the infections there were caused by unprotected heterosexual intercourse, according to UNAIDS.

States in southern India have traditionally been the hardest hit by the disease: in Tamil Nadu, for example, HIV rates of 50 percent have been

found among prostitutes.

However, these regions have also made strides in fighting the disease. Tamil Nadu scaled up prevention efforts in the 1990s.

In northern states, injecting drug use was the main driver of HIV infection, and there was little or no progress in cutting rates there even though they were lower than in the south, said UNAIDS.

Nationwide, only seven percent of Indians who needed antiretroviral HIV/AIDS drugs were actually being treated last year.

In addition, only 1.6 percent of pregnant women who needed treatment to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission were receiving it.

UNAIDS also sounded a warning about neighbouring Pakistan.

Monsoon leads to flooding in S India

AFP, Mumbai

Three people died and two were missing at sea as annual monsoon rains yesterday caused floods in India's south that saw parts of Kerala state flooded and fishing in the Arabian Sea curtailed, reports said.

Two women were killed after a coconut tree uprooted by the heavy rains fell on them and a man was killed when a tree landed on a passenger bus in Kerala, Press Trust of India reported.

Elsewhere in the state, hundreds of families were moved to relief camps as villages in low-lying districts were flooded after the monsoon hit Friday, a week earlier than expected PTI said.

The heavy rains and rough winds also saw several boats capsized off India's western coast, leading a local weather department to warn fishermen not to go to sea.

Kuwait emir calls for aid to poor Muslim nations

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah yesterday opened a two-day meeting of the board of governors of the Islamic Development Bank with a call for more assistance to poor Muslim nations.

"Many Muslim countries have suffered from unrest and turmoil which had its impact on the people. Our economic institutions should double their efforts to put in place development plans to improve their living standards," he said.

The Jeddah-based IDB is the economic arm of the 57-member Organisation of the Islamic Conference and was established in 1975. Its board of governors is made up of finance or economy ministers of member states.

IDB president Ahmad Mohammad Ali called for "organizational reforms" to the bank to enable it to move from its traditional role of providing finance to promoting investments, trade and

exports among member states.

The IDB, which gives low-interest loans, has so far extended a total of \$38 billion dollars to Islamic countries.

Member states on Tuesday signed an agreement establishing the International Islamic Trade Finance Corp aimed at boosting trade between Muslim countries.

The body will have an authorised capital of three billion dollars, with a subscribed capital of \$500 million dollars.

It will work to raise trade among the 56 IDB member states to 20 percent of their total exchanges over the next 10 years from 13 percent now.

Witness claims Saddam 'victims' still alive

AFP, Baghdad

of 148 men.

"The prosecutor said they were executed but I am telling you I ate with them some time ago" and that 23 of them were alive, said the witness, who had worked at Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison in the mid-1980s.

The anonymous witness said he was a teenager in Dujail in 1982 when an attempt on Saddam's life led to what the prosecution has termed a massive crackdown on the village, hundreds of arrests and the execution

still alive, this whole case should be reconsidered from the beginning," said the lawyer for Awad al-Bandar, whose revolutionary court under Saddam sentenced the men to death in 1984.

Saddam and seven associates are on trial for crimes against humanity stemming from the arrests, torture and execution of Dujail villagers as well as the destruction of their property.

The witness charged that the whole case was fabricated.