

An African example

KAMPALA

FOR a small, poor country like Uganda, AIDS causes troubles that existing medical and social services cannot cope with. Uganda was the first African country openly to acknowledge that it had an AIDS epidemic. Just how big an epidemic is still unknown, but certainly it is vast. One estimate puts the number of people infected with HIV at 1m, 11% of the adult population. Some projections based on such figures suggest that Uganda will have 22m people in 2015, one-third of whom will be infected; without AIDS, the population might have been around 37m.

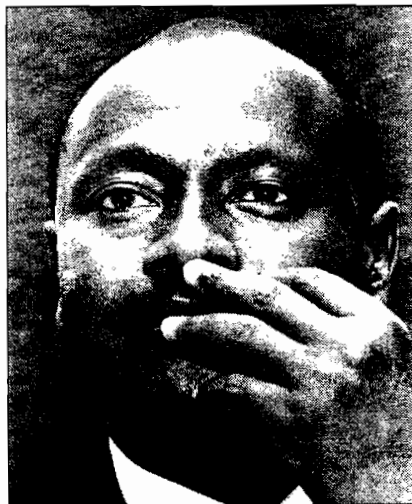
The effects of AIDS on village life are devastating. Young couples may die within a few years or even months of each other, leaving behind orphans and parents whom normally they would care for. Instead, the elderly find themselves forced to care for their sick children and grandchildren. Foreign aid workers and local charities alike are straining their resources to build orphanages and old peoples' homes. The traditional family structure may begin to break up.

The economic consequences of the epidemic are considerable. Beside the direct loss of hard-working young adults, many people have to stay away from work to care for relatives. A less obvious burden is that of funerals, which professionals in Kampala worry about constantly. Ugandans are buried in their traditional villages, and it is customary for all the dead person's colleagues to attend the funeral. This can mean that entire government departments are absent for days at a time, attending funerals in far-flung parts.

Efforts to prevent AIDS run up against

a basic problem: it is hard in Uganda, as anywhere else, to make people believe that what they do now will have consequences in several years' time, especially when they receive conflicting advice. Witch-doctors, often trusted more than modern doctors, may explain AIDS as the result of curses. Phoney cures abound. A year ago President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya claimed Kemron, a type of interferon created by a Kenyan-Japanese-American research team, as a miracle cure. Many people in Africa still believe him, though there is no proof that it works.

Educators have more than ignorance to contend with. Women may refuse to listen to advice at all if it involves talking about sex. Men, who may consider venereal disease almost a mark of pride, see the



Honest Museveni

use of condoms as unmasculine. There is also apathy. Uganda has undergone 20 years of war, looting and terror. It suffers from terrible endemic diseases, which in some areas still kill more people than AIDS. Many do not see why they should change sexual habits just because of another disease; arguments that would be compelling elsewhere can be weak in a society injured to death.

The spread of information too is difficult. Newspapers are few, and nearly 60% of Ugandans are illiterate anyway. Noreen Kaleeba, director of the AIDS Support Organisation (TASO) in Kampala, believes that the only effective way of teaching people how to avoid AIDS is one-to-one counselling, with a special African twist. TASO goes to villages to find local story-tellers responsible for recounting village history and brings them to Kampala, where they are trained about AIDS, and sent back to incorporate their new knowledge into their tales. The result may not be undiluted scientific truth—embellishment is a traditional part of African story-telling—but success, measured in questionnaires showing how many people now use condoms, is much higher than it was in the past.

For all its difficulties, the fact that Uganda does anything at all is testimony to the qualities of its president, Yoweri Museveni. Halting the spread of AIDS requires a willingness to admit that the problem exists. Many other African governments, notably Kenya's, have refused to acknowledge its extent. In Uganda, honesty about AIDS was possible in the atmosphere of political openness and press freedom that followed the end of a civil war. Other countries may require political upheavals before they too acknowledge their plight.