

# Emergency ward

**For the world's sake, do something about AIDS in Africa**

**A**FRICA's known plagues include war, hunger, debt, disunity. Beside them, to some African eyes, the unmeasured threat of AIDS looms small. The official figures minimise the danger, with a world total so far of 70,000 reported cases, of which 50,000 are supposed to be in the United States. The official figures are rubbish. The truth is obscured by governmental complacency, anecdotal panic and a scientific void.

In areas like Africa, nobody knows the size of the danger. Zaire, Uganda, Rwanda, Congo and their neighbours have no effective medical services, no testing laboratories, no statisticians. Relatively rich Nigeria records ten deaths from AIDS—but only 25,000 of its 100m people have ever been tested for the virus that causes the disease. Reputable doctors think AIDS may be commoner in Africa than in its world capital of San Francisco. In rich countries it has spread by buggery and filthy needles, in Africa (it seems) by heterosexual contact like any venereal disease. That would endanger whole populations: men, women and new-born children.

Even the fear, let alone the reality, of such an epidemic will have awful effects. In black Africa's most sophisticated country, Zimbabwe, AIDS recently killed a British doctor who unwittingly contracted it from an undiagnosed patient's blood. Africa in its complex of crises desperately needs travellers from outside: doctors, technical consultants, World Bank missionaries, private investors, above all the return of its own students after being educated abroad. The continent cannot even start to recover from all its other disasters if such people stay away, frightened for themselves and for their families.

Although donors are weary of offering Africa more of the aid that has so often been wasted, the case for special research



into AIDS is self-interested as well as humanitarian. Finding out the truth might prevent the establishment of a great world reservoir of the new plague. But help goes to those who ask, and most African governments are reluctant even to admit that they have the scourge, let alone seek assistance to tackle it. Mr Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, this year's chairman of the Organisation of African Unity, has honourably admitted that his son died of it, and that his country needs help to fight it. Many other leaders, notably those of Kenya (especially endangered because of its many tourists), seem to be trying to fight AIDS by banning talk of it.

## **Ignorance kills**

Some African rulers prefer ignorance to the possibly terrifying truth. None wants to take implicit blame for a disease mainly transmitted by sex. A few argue that other diseases—malaria, measles, bilharzia, hepatitis, sleeping sickness—kill tens of thousands of their people, and could be relatively cheaply cured, while AIDS has hardly begun killing people yet, and cannot be cured at all. Why devote desperately scarce resources to an insoluble problem, when soluble ones wait to be confronted?

This sounds logical, but isn't. Africa's established, appalling sicknesses would look almost benign if AIDS really took root. The first, absolute need is to identify and define the danger, the mere suspicion of which is already frightening off the helpers the continent most needs. Africans have to open their minds, and Africa's friends abroad their purses, if they are to confront this potential menace to all mankind.