

Africa joins global AIDS war

by Thomas Land **THESE**

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Africa's foremost medical colleges have come together in a global drive to confront the AIDS epidemic. The project is intended to save the continent from becoming a world reservoir of the new plague.

Collaboration in medical research and training is promoted by the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) and many other development agencies and donors, including the European Community and the World Bank. The WHO's global programme on AIDS is funded by Britain and 15 other countries, among them the United States and the Soviet Union.

The programme follows crucial policy reforms at many medical schools in Africa where the authorities have until recently ignored the developing epidemic.

Countries with the highest incidence of AIDS in central and eastern Africa have no effective medical services, testing laboratories or statisticians. But many African countries have advanced medical research and training institutions.

The actual size of the emergency is still not known: but the apparent spread of the disease in Africa through heterosexual contact endangers entire populations, rather than just specific, high-risk groups as in the rest of the world. Hence the fears, increasingly voiced in many forums that the continent could become a global reservoir of infection with the human im-

munodeficiency virus (HIV) which causes the disease.

A World Bank health adviser comments: "Africa may have one of the most serious AIDS problems. The economic impact of the disease is enormous because the infection tends to strike adults in their most productive years, often disproportionately hitting the better educated and skilled individuals."

Statistical projections made at the Harvard Institute of International Development put the likely annual loss to Zaire's economy due to premature AIDS deaths at 8 per cent of the gross national product within seven years. One study conducted in the Zambian copperbelt found that 68 per cent of men locally identified as HIV positive were skilled labourers employed in the mining industry, a dominant sector of the national economy.

Africa's AIDS control plan stresses the development of education and information strategies for stopping the spread of the infection. The programme includes funds for training medical personnel, improving facilities for protecting blood supplies, reinforcing sterilization practices throughout the health care system, the prevention of mother-to-child transmission and epidemiological surveillance.

This translates into many activities such as organizing or building laboratories, acquiring vehicles, setting up facilities for testing and screening blood, holding seminars for consultants and producing health education

materials. The programme embraces Africa's medical research and training establishment in collaboration with other leading institutions in the countries supporting the WHO global programme on AIDS.

The Congo, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Zimbabwe and Cameroon have just received pledges totalling \$20.4 million for the first phase of their AIDS programmes, bringing to 14 the number of African countries to receive financial support this year under the scheme. The others are Mozambique, Senegal, Zaire, Zambia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda.

The latest pledges were made during a series of meetings here held by the WHO. A further series of meetings to arrange funding for Africa as well as Asia and the Caribbean will be held later this year.

Africa's first and probably best AIDS control project is run in Uganda – in the absence of conventional health services which were destroyed in two decades of civil unrest. The national immunization programme reaches only a fraction of the population. Malaria and measles as well as AIDS infection rates are appalling.

The government hopes to rehabilitate several important hospitals and health centres and establish widespread educational and counselling programmes to control AIDS. The project is supported by a \$42.5 million World Bank credit granted in addition to WHO finance.