

Africa's free drugs budget spelt out

UNAids says the continent requires Sh375 billion every year for success of programme

By JEFF OTIENO

Africa needs \$5 billion (Sh375 billion) every year to provide free drugs to people infected with Aids, the UN body coordinating the epidemic's activities said yesterday.

UNAids warned that the millennium goal, set by the World Health Organisation to treat 3 million patients by 2005, might not be realised.

"If funding is not increased Africa might not meet the noble goal of providing free anti-retrovirals to its suffering population," said the organisation's director of regional support, Mr Michel Sidibe.

The official spoke at the launch of an Aids report at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre.

Mr Sidibe lamented that despite the aggressive campaign, with awareness rates hitting the 95 per cent mark in some countries, funding for the continent was still inadequate.

According to UNAids, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest infection rates, with 29 million people being HIV-positive.

"Despite the problems faced by sub-Saharan Africa, funding has remained low at only \$900 million (Sh67.5 billion)," he said.

Mr Sidibe said a further reduction of the prices of anti-retrovirals was essential to ensure more people received treatment.

The decommercialisation of the drugs, the organisation noted, had seen costs fall from \$15,000 (Sh1,170,000) to about \$300 (Sh23,400) a year. "We have made tremendous achievements and even seen compulsory licensing, where a country is allowed to import cheaper generic drugs if its population is threatened, being accepted worldwide," Mr Sidibe added.

He cited Botswana as a success story, saying 44 per cent of pregnant women in that country were under anti-retroviral treatment.

The director said Uganda was a model for East Africa, arguing that its infection rates had sharply fallen due to aggressive campaigns.

But he regretted that the disease had affected major arms of government, especially the military and education.

"Many workers in the two sectors have died of the disease," he said, and cited countries in and around the Great Lakes region, Zimbabwe and Swaziland as being particularly badly hit.

The organisation said the epidemic had erased many African countries' economic gains.



Photo/Peter Karuri

Delegates get their conference badges at the accreditation desk at Kenyatta Conference Centre yesterday.

Accreditation problems mar talks

By NATION Correspondent

Confusion and logistical problems marked the opening of the talks at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, Nairobi, yesterday. Hundreds of delegates had to queue in the blazing sun for several hours before being let into the hall for accreditation. This was because there was only one security metal detector. Inside the packed hall, several delegates found their names missing and could not get official badges and bags containing the programme. Addressing journalists at KICC,

ICASA chairman Dundi Owili admitted the confusion and problems.

"However, we are urging delegates to bear with us since security has to be maintained at all times to ensure the success of this important conference," he said.

Security inside and outside the hall was tight, with police vetting those getting in. Only delegates with official badges were being allowed in. By yesterday, about 5,000 delegates, including Health ministers from Uganda, Senegal, the Seychelles and Rwanda, had been registered for the talks, whose theme is *Access to Care: Challenges*.

President's message: Choose to live or die

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many countries. Africa must, therefore, fight the disease even more aggressively."

He said the Aids situation in Africa was not hopeless and that the disease could soon be contained.

The President Kibaki spoke when he opened the 13th International Conference on Aids and Sexually Transmitted Infections in Africa (ICASA) in Nairobi.

"High level political commitment will see Africa beat this enemy. This is why we declared Aids a national disaster and we have established a Cabinet sub-committee to fight the scourge," he told the conference whose theme is *Access to Care*.

The President also sent a strong appeal for Africa to be allowed to manufacture generic anti-retroviral drugs to help prolong the lives of people infected with HIV.

"Alternatively, manufacturers must drastically lower the prices for these drugs," he said.

The President said restrictions by the World Trade Organisation on trade in generic drugs was unfair to developing countries.

"We need to free the trade in generic drugs or drastically lower the prices of these drugs," he said.

Despite the tremendous improvement in democracy made by African countries, the continent was still lagging behind in economic development due to the large number of the labour force infected with the disease.

While expressing his concerns at the impact HIV/Aids has had on the continent's economic development, President Kibaki was optimistic that concerted efforts by African governments would turn the tide.

He urged the delegates to discuss at length how the obstacles facing the manufacture of generic life-prolonging drugs can be removed.

"My appeal to governments is to improve access to care by ensuring availability and affordability of anti-retroviral drugs, eradicating the stigma and discrimination associated with Aids and alleviating poverty which also contributes to the spread of the disease," he said.

He challenged African governments to take action that would reduce the spread of HIV/Aids and assure their people of a future.

He added: "Just as we thank our forefathers for sustaining past generations and our nations founding fathers for our independence, we must defend current generations. What we owe future generations is life, a life free of Aids."

He also challenged African people to make the right choices as the options individuals made determined how effective the fight against the HIV/Aids pandemic would be.

"The choices we make today as individuals will determine how effective the fight against the HIV/Aids epidemic will be. As individuals, we must choose between responsible behaviour and live or careless actions that put us and our families at risk."

"Indeed, the ultimate issue is one of

personal judgment. You, as an individual, must decide to live or to die," he said.

He, however, added that action remained for governments, civil society, religious groups, schools and other organisations to educate the people and avail the necessary preventive facilities.

He said the conference's theme had brought into sharp focus the obstacles that have continued to impede access to care by those infected or affected by Aids, including stigma, lack of drugs and poverty.

Said the President: "It is important that our campaign against HIV/Aids should also be directed to the removal of these obstacles through public education by all sectors. We should be able to eradicate the stigma associated with disease."

As part of access to care, the President said special attention must be given to the needs of the millions of orphaned children in Africa.

"These children need parental care, food, shelter, education and health care. Governments must work closer with communities to share this burden," he said.

In this connection, President Kibaki lauded the current initiative by Africa's First Ladies in the fight against the aids pandemic.

The First Ladies will be holding a parallel conference at the Safari Park Hotel, Nairobi. Those expected to attend include the First Ladies from South Africa, Burundi, Gabon, Tanzania, Guinea and Seychelles.

He said their efforts in empowering women and girls in the fight against Aids was commendable, considering that they were more vulnerable to the disease than men.

"Material deprivation, poor education and cultural attitudes give men the dominant choice over sexual matters," he said.

He commended ICASA for holding regular conferences to create awareness, encouraging scientific research and mobilising support in the fight against HIV/Aids.

The official opening ceremony was interrupted several times by power failure at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre which saw the conference room plunged into darkness.

The President was quick to apologise to the delegates and assured them that the problem would not continue during their five days of deliberations.

"Nairobi is not always in the dark like this. It is a great pity that the lightning has let us down this way. But I would like to assure you that we have welcomed you with all our hearts."

"We welcome you to do this job that we must actually win and I know we shall win it," he said to applause from the delegates.

On arrival at the Kenyatta International Conference Centre, President Kibaki was received by the Minister of State in the Office of the President, Dr Chris Murungaru, the Minister for Health, Mrs Charity Ngilu, and the conference chairman, Dr D.M. Owili.

Also present were the President Society of Aids in Africa, Prof Femi Soyinka, and a representative of the secretary-general of the United Nations, Mr Stephen Lewis.

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Cricket body joins fight against HIV

By NATION Correspondent

The International Cricket Council has joined forces with a UN agency to fight Aids.

The partnership was announced in Mumbai, India, and was signed by ICC President Ehsan Mani, United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids Communications Adviser (Geneva) Mahesh Mahalingam and President of the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) Jagmohan Dalmiya.

According to a statement, the partnership's primary aim is to use cricket to raise public awareness of HIV/Aids in cricket playing countries.

Other objectives are to incorporate UNAids education and training messages and materials in the ICC's own global development programme and encourage national cricket boards to support HIV/Aids issues.