

## SPECIAL REPORTS

# Aids scare drives youth to celibacy

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in Nairobi

Ugandan youth are so scared of sex these days that young people now dance at arms length in night clubs, unlike the olden days when nobody believed that Aids could kill.

Today, the situation has changed tremendously, particularly among the young who have seen their elders die like flies.

They have seen the way their uncles, aunts, and even their parents fall prey to that ugly, incurable disease that nobody understood until it was already too late.

Today, the art of seduction is no longer as highly esteemed among Ugandan youth as it was a generation back. No longer does being beautiful or handsome mean much to the young. Nor does being sexy or chic, dazzling or delectable, alluring or eligible.

Indeed, none of that holds much meaning to children growing up in a country where one in 10 people has the Acquired Immuno-Deficiency Syndrome and is withering away right before the children's frightened eyes.

Alarming has been the rapid spread of the epidemic throughout Uganda in the last decade that early last year, the Government launched a nationwide campaign targeting teenagers and persuading them not to have sexual relations before they get married.

Surprising enough, such a puritanical message has had a profound impact on the country's young people, particularly among those who have lost close relatives or have themselves become part of Uganda's most painful and problematic social concerns - Aids orphans.

It's a problem which the World Health Organisation (WHO) claims is so catastrophic that by the year 2000, there will be an estimated 10 million Aids orphans in the world, most of whom will reside in sub-Saharan Africa.

"When I think of these children, I fear greatly for the future development of Africa," said Dr Michael Merson, director of WHO's Global Programme on Aids, at an international conference on Aids in Africa held late last year.

Additionally, orphans in Africa were taken by members of the extended family," said James Ssekiwanuka of Save the Children in Uganda. "But this is becoming less feasible in areas with many Aids deaths. More and more children find themselves living with grandparents, in institutions or homeless."

Dr Nkandu Luo, head of pathology services at the University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka, Zambia, said: "Some years ago, we had the extended family. If my sister died, I took in my sister's children. This is not possible anymore. Eight children are common in families. But how often can one take in eight children?"

One strategy the Government has devised to tackle the problem involves reaching out to young people through non-traditional educational channels. With foreign funding, several ministries have got together with a number of Ugandan professionals to develop anti-Aids messages targeting millions of youth and reaching them through every media channel one can imagine.

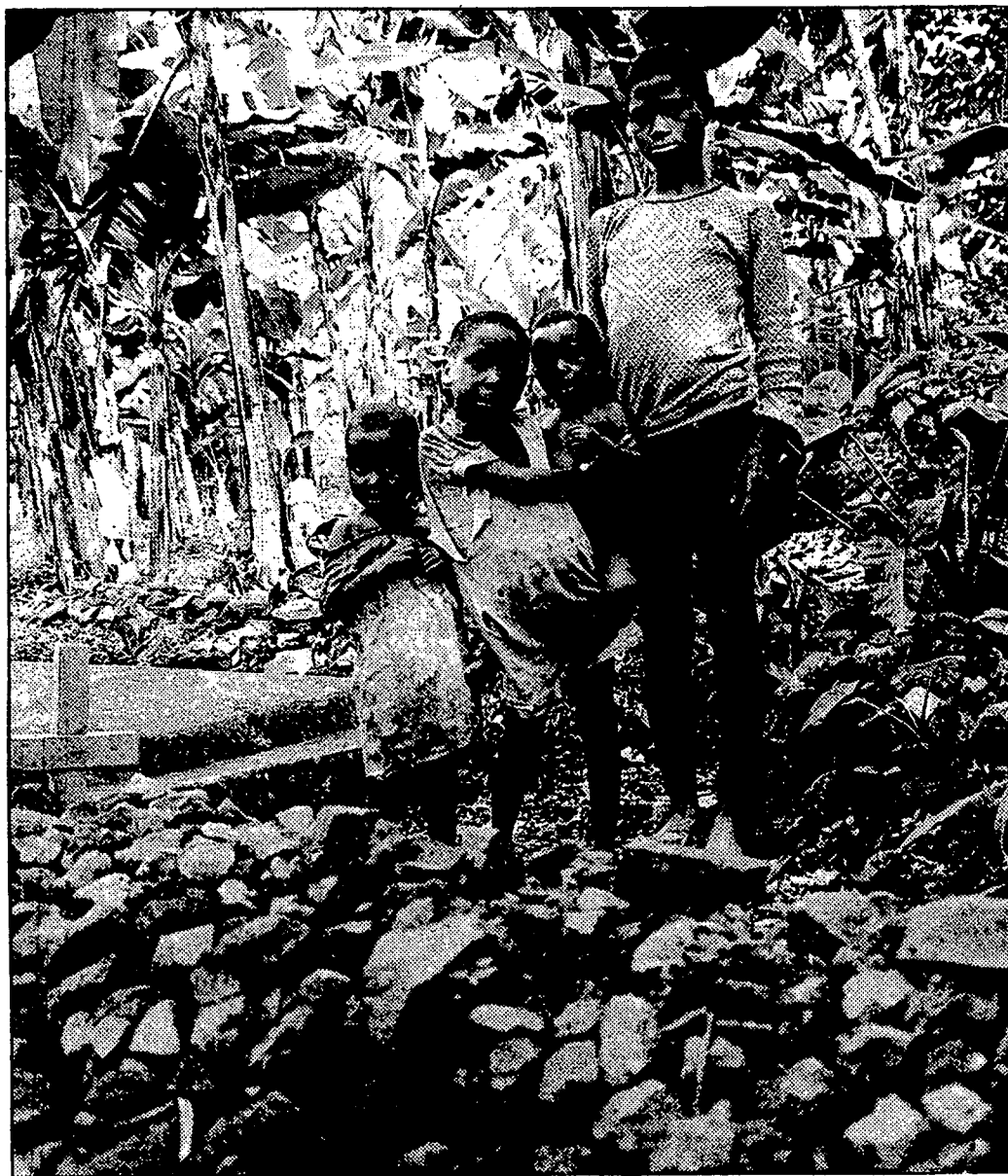
Ugandan youth are being bombarded with terrifying anti-Aids propaganda practically everywhere - in the theatres and community social halls, in the churches and Revolutionary Army Council youth meetings.

In discos and night clubs, young people are constantly being reminded of the dire consequences of early sex, particularly when they hear the soulful songs of the late Phillie Lutaya, one of the country's leading musicians who died of Aids a couple of years back.

Lutaya did more than almost anyone to sensitise the young about the agony of Aids. He was among the first public figures, apart from President Museveni himself, to come out openly and admit that Aids was an issue which people had to address and that the time for being shy about speaking openly about sex was long gone.

But if Lutaya was the first anti-Aids spokesman to use the radio to preach against pre-marital sex, the Government is now broadcasting blood-curdling horror stories and slogans over the radio as well.

In a spine-tingling tone that seems to come



Four orphans stand next to the grave of their parents who died of Aids: "Young people are now wiser and more wary about worldly temptations."

straight from the dead, one radio advert declares: "Aids, the fear of the unknown - pre-marital sex, the sure way to an early grave."

Another warns: "Love carefully. That person you so cherish might be the special one to lead you to your grave!"

Such scare tactics seem to be doing the trick!

Young unmarried people, petrified by the possibility of an early demise, are increasingly avoiding sexual encounters.

Not only that, they even seem to be avoiding situations which might tempt them slightly to taste that forbidden fruit.

But many young people aren't merely assimilating the message. They are also actively passing the 'bad news' on. Some have taken up script-writing as one means of discouraging their peers from taking risks with pre-marital sex. Others have simply taken to the streets, attacking would-be HIV-carriers and sexual provocateurs, once known as prostitutes.

In downtown Kampala, for instance, one woman skimpily clad in skin-tight slacks and a sheer blouse was recently stripped naked by angry youth as two policemen looked on, dispassionately.

Asked later why they did not come to the woman's aid, one of them said: "These days, you just don't dress that provocatively."

On another occasion, inside one of Kampala's popular night clubs, a girl wearing a T-shirt with obscenities scribbled across her back was frogmarched out of the club by irate patrons who also did not want to be provoked!

Even the sight of lovers walking arm-in-arm on city streets can easily elicit angry cat-calls and ugly jeers from a public which is clearly sick of openly suggestive sexual conduct, and which in any case, was never the way Ugandan lovers traditionally behaved.

With 35,000 certified cases of people

currently infected with Aids and another 1.5 million afflicted with the human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV) that causes Aids, Uganda now leads the list of African countries plagued with the epidemic.

Official statistics on those who have so far died of Aids - a disease that attacks the body's immunity system and destroys its ability to resist disease - are sketchy at best, speculative at least.

But officials say that probably tens of thousands have died of Aids since the first cases were diagnosed in the western district of Rakai in the early 1980s.

One of the first countries in the world to acknowledge it had a serious problem with Aids, President Museveni chose early on to be honest about the plight his people were facing, unlike most African heads of state who, until recently, not only denied they had a problem but even claimed they hadn't seen one case of Aids in their countries.

Being honest about the epidemic proportions of Aids in Uganda not only earned Museveni worldwide respect but it also earned the country millions of dollars in assistance to fight the Aids crisis.

Some Ministry of Health officials claim the situation may have been hyped out of proportion, but even they admit that the figures available are not far from the truth, that Aids reached epidemic proportions years ago.

But if there is hope to be found in the Ugandan situation, it's to be seen in the youth who are far wiser and more wary about worldly temptations than their parents were at their age.

In fact, the latest catchword on the lips of Kampala's youths and street children today is SIFA, the Luganda equivalent of "I will not die," and derived from the acronym of the anti-Aids campaign, SYFA - short for Safe-guard the Youth from Aids.

## What is the future of the deadly HIV virus?

By MARGARETTA wa GACHERU  
Lest you forget the jolly Green Monkey from Africa who Western researchers still contend is the founding father of Aids, a recent issue of *Newsweek* (March 22nd, 1993) will remind you - that the prevailing propaganda on Aids still holds the HIV virus has its roots in Africa!

Having modified the green monkey myth a bit since the first hypothetical history of Aids was composed some 10 years back, when the first cases of Aids were reported (presumably in the States), Aids researchers now claim to have come up with a number of new insights on the killer disease.

But they still insinuate that the pivotal point, when Aids infected the human blood stream, was when the green monkey somehow passed the HIV virus over to Africans!

Not that Aids researchers like Dr Paul Ewald, an evolutionary biologist at Amherst College in the States, aren't aware of the insult this sort of scenario implies, particularly when one recalls the ways that Aids gets transmitted - infected cells are passed on either through sex or "other exchanges of body fluid."

These days, researchers like Dr Ewald and Gerald Myers, head of the HIV Data Bank project at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, do seem to focus on the "body fluid" exchange theory over the obnoxious sexual scenario.

They suggest that people who used to regularly hunt and handle primates could have easily been bit or scratched. They could have even cut themselves while butchering an animal, suggest Aids apologists who may wish to lessen the abuse to Africans but still do not care to relinquish the view that Aids had its first home on our continent.

Another possibility the researchers have put forth is the scenario that Aids was spawned from a polio vaccination programme carried out in Africa in the 1950s.

The theory goes that over a four-year period, some 325,000 Africans imbibed an oral vaccine produced in the kidney of a green monkey!

This is the sort of revisionist view on the roots of Aids coming out of places like the Centres for Disease Control in the United States, where recent research ostensibly proved "the potential for cross-species transmission" of the virus, from primate to man.

Why all these theories seem to sound stranger than fiction is difficult to put one's finger on. But it would seem as if they were devised to somehow justify the expenditure of billions of dollars on fruitless Aids research.

As *Newsweek* openly admits, ten years after the world first heard about Aids, we are no closer to finding its cure than we are to solving the mystery of its actual origin.

But Aids researchers are decidedly Darwinian in their claim that the virus has evolved; rather it has mutated to adapt to its new and more virulent environment!

What's more, with the recent discovery of a new benign HIV viral strain, the Aids experts seem to feel their "mutation theory" has been given more credence.

And while their hope is that more benign strains of Aids will appear (as they did recently in Australia) in days to come, wishful thinking won't change the fact that Aids research premised on racist myths does a serious disservice to the scientific community.