



CECAFA YOUTH TOURNAMENT/AIDS AWARENESS CAMPAIGN



Mrs Beth Mugo, leads a "minute-of-silence" to reflect on how HIV/Aids has claimed the lives of.



Kenya A and Eritrea clash in a preliminary CECAFA match at City Stadium.

By EVANS OMBIRO

All roads lead to the City Stadium, Nairobi, this afternoon. An explosive final between Kenya 'A' and perennial rivals Uganda in the junior CECAFA championship is expected to draw a capacity crowd.

This brings to a close the under 20 challenge CUP finals.

The eagerly awaited clash is laced with excitement: both finalists will be aiming at scoring two goals. Interestingly, even eliminated teams, some from the sidelines, will score at least a goal, as all players can become champions, depending on the way they behave towards a killer disease.

This incredible scenario unfolds at the stadium, thanks to a unique campaign designed to "kick Aids out of Africa."

The players will literally, be kicking two balls: the championship football, and the HIV/Aids pandemic. The players know that Aids is another all together formidable opponent - a

Record crowd expected at kick out Aids finals

disease which has no cure.

Essentially, the Cup they will be fighting for is no ordinary one. The very name is an acronym for **Caring Understanding Partner**, symbolising the kind of sportsmen the young men are being moulded into.

The slogan of this year's championship is "Break the silence!" which urges the players to talk about Aids, since preventing the scourge from spreading further is a team effort.

The under 20 teams from the seven participating countries have been exhorted to talk with friends about how to prevent Aids from

scoring a goal on them. Instead, it will be them scoring against the killer disease that has claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, football players included.

Indeed, the initiative to get players discussing how to beat Aids was triggered by the realisation by regional soccer chiefs that the pandemic had already killed many footballers.

According to football authorities in East and Central Africa, Uganda and Kenya have lost 164 players from Aids respectively, during the past two years.

During the period of the tournament, local health professionals, with technical assistance from the John Hopkins University, Centre for Communication Programs provided a campaign orientation and health education on HIV/Aids prevention to players, coaches, and managers.

Under the CUP initiative, top athletic teams are recruited to compete in a match or tournament to draw fans to a stadium where health education, such as HIV/Aids is provided.

The teams receive an orientation on the health issue. Teams learn how to maintain their health and help friends and family stay healthy.

Before the match, team stars may appear on television, radio, print materials or make personal appearances to publicise the match and the health promotion cause.

Local competitions to produce theme songs or theatre performances for the event maybe held. CUP caravans, consisting of teams travelling to the matches and serving as spokespeople at stops along the route, maybe arranged.

During the matches, health promotion materials featuring the competing teams as spokespersons are distributed.

Tickets have health messages printed on them. A dignitary leads a "minute-of-silence" to reflect on how HIV/Aids has claimed the lives of so many footballers and

fans, followed by a "breaking-of-the-silence" with speeches and motivational talks by leaders, players or fans about how to prevent the further spread of the disease.

After the match, entertaining videos with relevant health education messages may be shown to spectators.

During the tournament, health experts armed these groups with essential information about HIV/Aids, including how it is and is not transmitted, how to protect themselves and their families, and how to practise Aids prevention behaviour.

Aids messages and related activities featured prominently in the preceding 19 CUP matches. Teams held special matches featuring HIV/Aids educational activities both during promotional events and at the stadium.

In the stadium, HIV/Aids educational messages appear on billboards and trained health counsellors have been distributing HIV/Aids materials through Health Information and Referral Booths, to interested fans.

The fans left the stadium enriched with information on how to combat the deadly disease.

Team players talked to crowds before the match and during half time, advocating healthy behaviours.

The campaign to break the silence on Aids was initiated locally because statistics on the havoc the pandemic is wrecking on Africa call for a concerted effort to check its spread. The alarming facts and figures put the CUP programme in perspective, showing its relevance.

The disease demands action, particularly in the form of programmes targeting the youth. Young people in their reproductive years make up the largest segment of the population in Africa and are the most hard hit by Aids. More than half of all new HIV infections occur among those under 25 years old.

The virus spreads like bush fire, such that six people are infected with the Aids virus every minute, worldwide; roughly 8,500 a day.

There are 31 million people worldwide living with the Aids virus; 23 million are in sub-Saharan Africa, with one million of these being children.

The negative effects of the scourge on the continent have earned it the dubious distinction

of the leading killer of Africans.

Aids has reduced life expectancy in the continent by up to 20 years, overtaking armed conflicts as the number one killer.

There is growing evidence that Aids is the single greatest threat to national welfare and development in Africa.

The disease has hit the continent harder than anywhere in the world. It is doubling and tripling infant mortality rates.

In Kenya, an estimated 750,000 people have Aids and 1.9 million are HIV positive. In Western Province, 25 per cent of girls between 15 and 19 were HIV positive.

The United Nations predicts a 17-year loss in life expectancy for Kenyans for the year 2010.

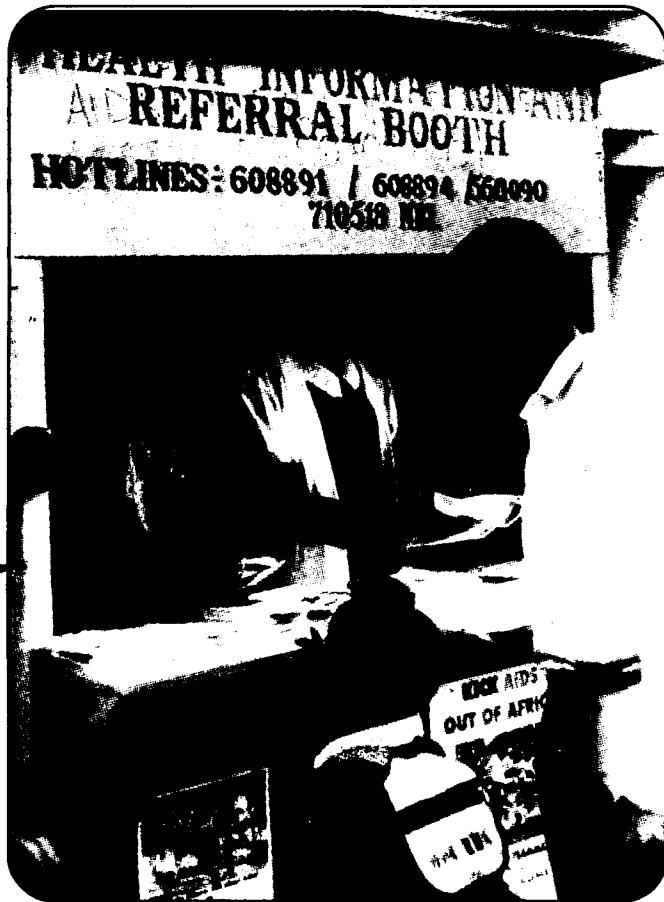
Against this background, the tragic situation (which is being reversed by initiatives such as CUP) is that there are few sources of information for youth related to their sexuality and Aids.

Moreover, there is reluctance among parents and schools to talk with young people about Aids.

That is why football matches are proving ideal venues for sharing information on this common enemy.

Other opportunities for sharing such information include community events, gathering of friends and family, radio and television programmes, youth centres and schools, youth football leagues and camps, as well as interviews with journalists.

The CUP Initiative has recorded positive results in countries where it has been undertaken.



Both children and adults are served by trained health counsellors at the information health booths run by the programme.



Some of the members of CECAFA executive committee.