Aids scourge is kept secret by terrified families

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LUSAKA, ZambIa

Trucks packed with hymn-singing mourners on their way to funerals are a daily sight in Lusaka.

"You stand by Leopard's Hill

Cemetery and every day you will

see our bus," a parastatal employee told the National Mirror.

"You have to book in advance to

get it." .

Usually the families are

mourning another AIDS victim.

The scourge is raging throughout

Zambia.

Eleven infants out of 115 aged

six months to a year in the Xasisi

Mission for Orphans in Lusaka

are HIV positive.

Surveys at ante-natal clinics in

Lusaka have revealed that one in

four pregnant women carries the

AIDS virus and a hospital in

southern province reported 60-70

percent or all patients infected.

Zambia-wide, official figures

suggest there are some 90,000

with the virus or the full-blown

disease but care workers believe

the true figure is much higher.

After years of lying, the government decided to come clean

on AIDS and campaign for prevention.

Kenneth Kaunda, then

President, courageously announced

that the death of one of

his sons was due to AIDS. But as

far as most families are concerned

the word is taboo.

"The subject is totally hushed

up," a churchman said. "People

won't admit it or talk about it.

It's whispered at funerals but

they generally pretend the cause

'If death is pneumonia or

malaria."

AIDS rampages through Zambia's

rural as well as urban areas.

Transmitted almost entirely by

heterosexual sex, the syndrome is

popularly known as "the slow

puncture disease."

Officials are deeply concerned, at the effect on the economy.

With funeral expenses climbing,

absenteeism increasing and more

employees dying, some companies are starting to fight.

They are teaching workers

about AIDS through videos, information

charts and lunch-time

discussions in hopes of slowing

the virus and cutting their losses.

Barclays Bank of Zambia Ltd

plans to make condoms available its toilets for its 1,800 workers

and is hiring a full-time

counsellor.

Zambia Airways holds seminars

for air crew who are considered

a' high. risk group.

As well as damaging the economy,

AIDS is affecting medical

services. Many are running short

of blood for transfusions because

some donated blood is infected

and other would-be donors do not come forward for 'fear that tests

may reveal they are HIV positive.

President Chiluba also has few

resources to spend on health care.

The Christian Churches of

Zambia got together to produce a

pamphlet urging wider education

of the people and one-partner

loyalty among the sexually active.

The message does not seem to

be getting through. One Lusaka

man said, "You can go to a nightclub

or a bar and see that some

guy!! are very reckless. After

drinking a lot they will go off

with any girt"

Even more frightening is this

comment from a churchman:

"Many people who fully understand

the risk say, "If I'm going

to get it I'm going to get it but I'm

not ,going to change my lifestyle."

"Some people diagnosed with

AIDS actually go out with a vengeance to sleep with as many people as possible.

"Whether the philosophy is the…

the more people with AIDS …

less they will stand out, I don’t know. But that really is quite

shattering.

The final part in this exclusive series will be in the Nation tomorrow.

(World News Background is on

Page 13 today)

Dr Kenneth Kaunda: Son died of

Aids.

Aids patients at a clinic in rural Zambia. The HIV virus is said to have affected hundreds of thousands of people but most families prefer not to talk about it. (File Picture)