**Aids: Children might suffer the most**

By DOUGLAS KIMANI

The much dreaded Aids - Acquired Immuno Defficiency Syndrome - disease is increasingly putting Africa's already besieged children under more pressure.

The disease is threatening the continent's future and could be its greatest set-back as it wrecks economies and claims millions of lives daily.

Africa's children's could bear *the* blunt of it all. According to health officials, more juveniles will be killed by the disease in addition to depriving many of them parental care and protection.

The United Nations Children's Education Fund -

UNICEF - estimates that a total of 5.5 million children in East and Central Africa will be made orphans by the disease by the year 2000.

The situation in Kenya could be horrifying as some people think the figures are underestimated.

The estimates, these people say, are based on the assumption that Aids is confined or concentrated in urban areas.

"This, the experts say, is fallacious as there is evidence to suggest that the disease has penetrated rural communities as a result of the worker migration phenomenon."

Hence, many remote rural villages which were thought to be Aids-free or low-risk areas might not be.

Some rural communities, it is feared, could even have more Aids cases than urban areas especially in regions where traditional practices such as mass circumcision and widow inheritance, is still practiced.

In 1988, Kenya had only 2 000 confirmed Aids cases. By 1991 the figure had risen to 19,000cases, in a period of only about three years.

Tragically' for the African child, the advent of Aids has coincided with the disintegration of the traditional extended family structure which guaranteed care and protection to destitute members. In this set-up, orphans were adopted by close relatives and taken care of until they were old enough to fend for themselves.

The stigma of Aids which some communities attribute to bad spirits and witchcraft marginalises the orphans to such an extent that they become outcasts. They are shunned, ignored and abandoned.

In July last year, Dr. Naftally Agata a doctor at Kenyatta National Hospital, revealed that the hospital was at a loss on what to do with about 60 children, some of them HIV positive who had been abandoned at the institution by their relatives.

Mainly because of the fear that children whose parents have died of Aids may have already contracted the disease, many foster homes are unwilling to take them.

Many national Aids awareness and care programmes continue to target at the adults while the children suffer and die silently.