Good news from doctors

VANCOUVER, Tuesday

Aids researchers presented solid

evidence yesterday that the disease

'has killed nearly six million

pie may now be treatable thanks

to "cocktails" of experimental

drugs.

Speakers at the 11th International

Conference on Aids drew cheers

and applause from nearly 15,000

delegates as they summed up recent

breakthroughs in combination drug

treatments, which for the first time

offer hope that Aids may no longer

be a death sentence.

But militant protesters, venting

the angry frustration that has

marked so much of the battle

against Aids, quickly accused drug

firms of profiteering with expensive

drugs that may never reach

most of the people infected with the

virus.

The doctors, however, remain e

cautiously upbeat.

The new drug mixes "have

taught us a lot about treatment ...

and hope for the future," said Dr.

Scott Hammer, head of the department

of infectious diseases at Boston's

Deaconess Hospital and Harvard

Medical School.

"Access and cost are major obstacles

to the Third World. But

there is hope for more and more results in the years to come and for control of the HIV virus."

The excitement centres on startling

results achieved by combining

new drugs, called protease inhibitors,

with more traditional anti

Aids treatments such as AZT and

other drugs.

Scientists are now voicing hope

these cocktails will batter the resilient

human immunodeficiency virus

into submission, perhaps eve eradicating it from the bodies of patients

now condemned to die.

"Just six months ago, this statement

would have been seen as faro'

fetched or even ludicrous," said Dr

Hammer.

Potent drug combinations including

protease inhibitors, which

attack an enzyme crucial to the

multiplication of HIV, have already

reduced the virus to undetectable

levels -in some patients, raised

counts of CD-4 immune cells, and

dramatically improved their health,

appearance and quality of life.

Despite the advances being trumpeted

at the conference, there is still

deep caution in dealing with a virus

that is a moving target. Until recently,

it has outsmarted researchers by

mutating - transforming itself into

different strains - and building

swift resistance to drug therapies. Dr Hammer, and many other scientists,

stressed that the new drugs

were promising but left many questions

unanswered.

"The jury's still out," said Dr

Michelle Daniels, a general practitioner

from Princeton, New Jersey,

who treats Aids patients.

Advocates of the new drug therapy

are leaning toward using the protease combinations in large doses in

the early stages of treatment to cut

the risk the virus will build resistance.

Dr Robert Gallo, a pioneer of

Aids research, summed up the approach

to new combination drug

therapy by saying: "HIV replication

causes Aids. Kill early and kill

it hard." Drug mixes including protease

inhibitors can cost around

$15,000 (Sh859,350) a year in the

United States. They are thus out of reach of patients

in the Third World, where the

United Nations estimates 90 percent

of the world's 21.8 million

HIV-infected people live.

The only course in Africa and

Asia is preventive medicine and the

hope, one day, of a vaccine. But a

vaccine is still a long way off.

Militant anti-Aids demonstrators

yesterday targeted Abbott Laboratories, one of the companies manufacturing

an expensive new. drug.

Protesters descended on an Abbott

display booth, tossed pharmaceutical literature onto the floor and

chanted slogans accusing the company

of profiteering.

Dr William Paul, Director of the

US Office for Aids Research said:

"Even if these drugs turn out to be

everything we had hoped for, a tremendous amount must still be done

to make sure those who need treatment are treated."

Countries like the US should

help Africa and Asia if only because

they were members of the

world community. But self-interest

was also involved, he noted. "We

cannot predict how the virus will

evolve," he said. (Agencies)

U See Editorial - Page 6

Mr Michael Belefonte (left) and Mr David Pasquarelli of ACT UP San Francisco yell out as several hundred

Aids protestors march through the streets of downtown .Vancouver on Monday. (Picture by REUTERS)

Gay men Ignore Aids Warning

VANCOUVER, Tuesday

A generation of young gay men

across the industrialized world,

tragically ignoring the lessons of

the Aids epidemic, risk a new wave

of HIV infection by engaging in

risky sex, researchers reported yesterday.

The trend, first spotted in San

Francisco a few years ago, has now

been documented across the United

States, Europe and Canada.

"The epidemic of HIV among

young gay men is not only an individual

tragedy but is certainly also a

major public health concern," said

Mr John de Wit, a psychologist at

the University of Utrecht in the

Netherlands.

Mr de Wit said large numbers of

gay men are becoming infected

with HIV before age *is.*

In some parts of the United

States, as many as one in 10 carries

the virus, and the risk seems to be

especially high for non white minorities.

"The figures are high, very high,

especially if we consider that these

young men have become sexually

active in an era in which massive

effort was exerted to increase

awareness of HIV risk behaviours

and to promote safer sex," he said.

A variety of surveys have found

that about one-third of young gay men

in their 20s typically engage in

anal sex without condoms, the riskiest

form of homosexual behaviour.

(AP)

Birth control linked

to HIV susceptibility

VANCOUVER, Tuesday

Dr Arnaud Fontanet was looking

for a group of women for his HIV

research when he came across a

stunning figure: six of 19 factory

workers getting their birth control

in shots carried the virus.

The Ethiopian women, who were

studied as part of a project by the

Ethiopian-Netherlands Aids research

project, were all receiving

shots of Depo-Provera every three

months.

Dr Fontanet, who presented the

case study at the conference said

the women were in most other respects

similar to their co-workers

who used no contraception or took

the pill ..

They had no more partners, no

more casual sex and no more other

sexually transmitted diseases than

their co-workers, said Fontanet.

The study also ruled out, dirty needles at the clinic as the source of

The HIV.

A total of 6.5 per cent of women

at the factory who took the pill tested

positive for the human immunodeficiency

virus that causes Aids

while 7.8 per cent of women who

used no birth-control tested positive

for the HIV virus.

But 31.6 per cent of women getting

the Depoprovera carried the

deadly virus, he said.

"Birth control is key to developing

countries," cautioned Dr Fontanet.

Dr Fontanet's research turned up

no reason for the difference but one,

avenue of-investigation is that progesterone

used in birth control

products causes the vaginal walls to

thin, facilitating the transmission of

the virus that causes Aids, or acquired

immune deficiency syndrome. A preliminary study on a group

of monkeys found that monkeys

taking the hormone had a thinner

vaginal wall, but Dr Fontanet

warned that the same results may

not be found in humans.

Meanwhile, a triple combination

of Abbott Laboratori'es Inc.'s Norvir

and two other drugs has kept the

Aids virus at bay for 60 weeks in a

clinical trial, the company said yesterday.

. In an update presented at the

Conference Abbott said 17 patients

in France with advanced, previously

untreated HIV infection were

given Norvir, Glaxo Wellcome

Pic's AZT and Roche Holding

Ltd. 's Hivid. After 60 weeks on the

therapy, the count of the patients'

disease-fighti.ng CD4 cells rose to a

mean of 337 from a mean of ]55

cells, the company said in a statement.

(Agencies)

Taylor criticises US

Canadian policies

VANCOUVER, Tuesday

Actress and Aids activist Elizabeth

Taylor bitterly attacked the US and

Canadian governments yesterday

accusing Washington of committing

"premeditated murder" in

failing to fund Aids programmes.

She told a private reception at the

conference that euphoria over medical

advances did little to dispel the

reality - that most people with

HIV do not have access to drugs or

other treatments.

Ms Taylor, one of the first celebrity

Aids campaigners and a

founder and National Chairwoman

of the American Foundation for Aids Research (AmFAR), critised

US reluctance to fund programmes

to provide sterile needles

to drug users, as is done in some

European countries, as "a glaring

example of politics.

"In a society that proclaims to

value human life above all, the deliberate

withholding of the means

to self-protection is more than passive

neglect. It is a measured act of

premeditated murder."

Ms Taylor told the audience.

which included US Health Secretary

Donna Shalala. that too much

emphasis was being placed on

purely scientific research.(Reuter)

Rare move

by drug firm

VANCOUVER, Tuesday

Stung by accusations that drug

companies are making billions at

the expense of Aids victims, Glaxo-

Wellcome Pic said yesterday it was

Starting to pay the community back.

It invited Aids activists, researchers

mid community workers

attending the conference to a· special

lunch to hear about its "positive

action programme" to work

with Aids groups, governments and

, health care providers. "We, the private

sector, the phannaceutical industry, have to recognize our responsibility,"

Mr Jim Niedel,

executive director for research and

development at Glaxo, said.(Reuter)