

HIV/AIDS Remains Top Global Health Challenge

By George E. Curry
NNPA Editor-in-Chief

BANGKOK, Thailand (NNPA) — Scientists and health leaders around the world have diagnosed and developed vaccines

for many dreaded diseases. More than two decades after the discovery of AIDS, however, experts have learned a great deal about it — even to the point of developing life-extending antiretroviral drugs — but have yet to conquer the quickly-spreading pandemic. Every day, approximately 14,000 people are infected with HIV for the first time. "AIDS is unique in human history in its rapid spread, its extent and the depth of its impact," according to UNAIDS 2004 annual report. "Since the first AIDS case was diagnosed in 1981, the world has struggled to come to grips with its extraordinary dimensions. ... Now, more than 20 years later, 20 million people are dead and 37.8 million people worldwide are living with HIV. And still, AIDS expands relentlessly, destroying people's lives and in many cases seriously damaging the

fabric of society."

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the infection that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), occurs when the body's immune system is weakened by HIV; it eventually develops diseases and cancers.

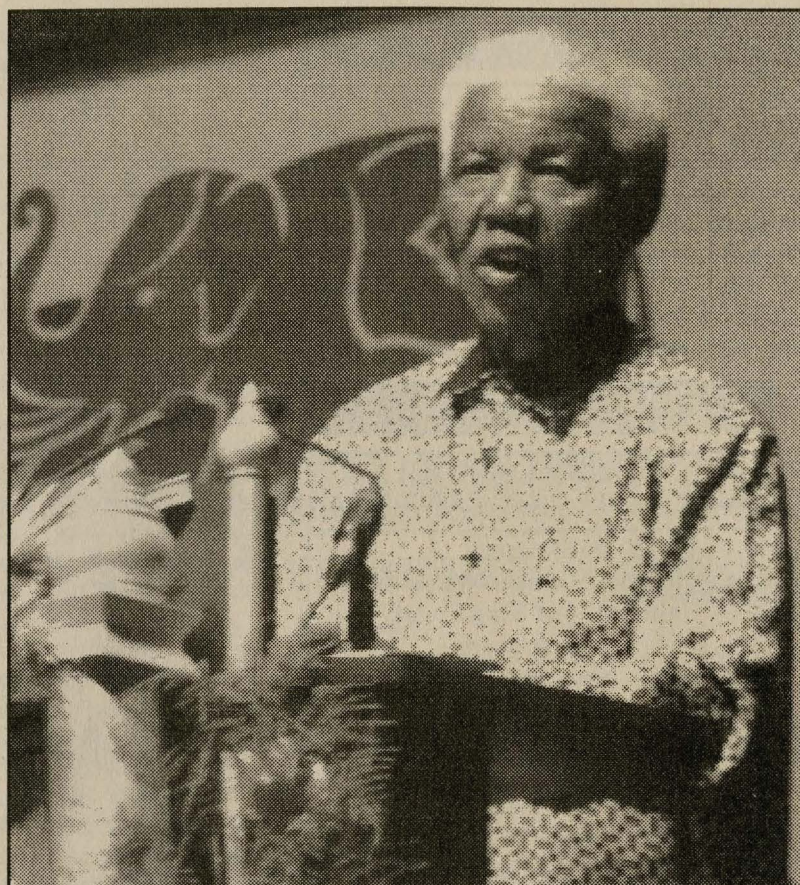
Sub-Saharan Africa has less than 11 percent of the world's population but almost two-thirds of the people living with HIV — 3 million people. The most affected group, between 15 and 49 years old, represents more than 30 percent of the population in Swaziland and Lesotho. In Botswana, the infection rate for that age group has risen to 37 percent.

For women, the data is even more devastating. Every country in Africa for which data is available, women ages 15 to 49 represent more than 50 percent of all HIV infections, according to UNAIDS. In Angola, Burundi, Malawi and South Africa, the figure is 59 percent. It is 60 percent in Uganda and 65 percent in Kenya.

Consequently, life expectancy is down in many African countries. Between 1990 and 2002, life expectancy declined from 53.6 year to 36.3 years in Lesotho, from 56.6 to 33.9 in Zimbabwe and from 47.4 percent to 32.7 percent in Zambia, according to UNAIDS.

In the United States, one-quarter of the 850,000 to 950,000 people living with HIV or AIDS do not know their HIV status. African-Americans represent 12 percent of the U.S. population but about half of all new HIV infections.

A report made public here observes, "According to the US Centers for Disease Control, the proportion of AIDS cases among adults and adolescent women in the United States has more than tripled since 1985. The epidemic has increased most dramatically among African American and Hispanic women. Together, they represent less than one fourth of all women in the US; yet they accounted for 80



Nelson Mandela Wants Everyone to Do More to Stop AIDS
Photo/Greg McNeal

estimate that 5 million to 6 million people need HIV treatment in low- and middle-income countries. Only 7 percent — 400,000 — had access at the end of 2003.

There is also the issue of money.

A United Nations report says global spending on AIDS has increased from \$1.2 billion in 2000 to \$6 billion this year. Still, that represents a 50 percent shortfall. Estimates are that in order to comprehensively respond to the epidemic, \$12 billion annually will be needed by 2005 and \$20 billion by 2007.

In a speech to the 17,000 delegates to the international AIDS conference, former South African President Nelson Mandela urged everyone to do more. He said, "History will surely judge us harshly if we do not respond with the energy and resources that we can bring to bear in the fight against HIV/AIDS."

President Bush pledged last year to provide \$15 billion over five years to fighting HIV/AIDS, most of it going to Africa and the Caribbean. United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan says the U.S. should be doing more.

"We hear a lot about weapons of mass destruction. We hear a lot about terrorism, and we are worried about the weapons of mass destruction because of their potential to kill thousands of people," Annan said in an interview with the BBC. "Here we have an epidemic that is killing millions. What is the response?"

The Bush administration says it has donated about twice the combined contributions of all other nations, enough to treat 2 million HIV-infected people, caring for 10 million HIV/AIDS victims and preventing another 7 million infections.

Despite its giving, the United States was frequently and harshly criticized at the international AIDS conference. U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator Randall L. Tobias' speech was cut short by booing protesters. When he spoke later, Tobias said, "...\$15 billion over five years is the largest financial commitment ever, by any nation, for any major international health initiative dedicated to a single disease."

Critics say the U.S. can afford to do even more and that part of the \$15 billion is money that would have gone to the selected countries in other forms, such as direct grants. They have also accused the U.S. of sending the wrong signal to the international community by drastically cutting back on the number of scientists and policymakers allowed to attend this biennial international conference.

In 2002, the U.S. took 236 federal scientists to the conference in Barcelona, Spain, where Heath and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson was shouted down. This year, the administration, citing financial limitations, brought a delegation of only 50.

Judy D. Auerbach, vice president of public policy for the American Foundation for AIDS Research, says, "Limiting attendance [in Bangkok] for what seem to be political and ideological reasons, draws into question how seriously the USA does take the fight against the disease."

There is also a question of how seriously Black leaders take this fight. African-Americans are less likely to be tested than Whites. And because they discover the infection later, African-Americans have lower survival rates. For people diagnosed with AIDS since 1994, according to the CDC, 55 percent of African-Americans survived after nine years, compared to 61 percent of Latinos, 64 percent of Whites and 69 percent of Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Some activists are pushing for grater HIV/AIDS awareness among African-Americans.

Phill Wilson, executive director of the Los Angeles-based Black AIDS Institute, says, "Black leaders across the board actually need to say, 'This thing is killing us.' It has to become a priority for us."

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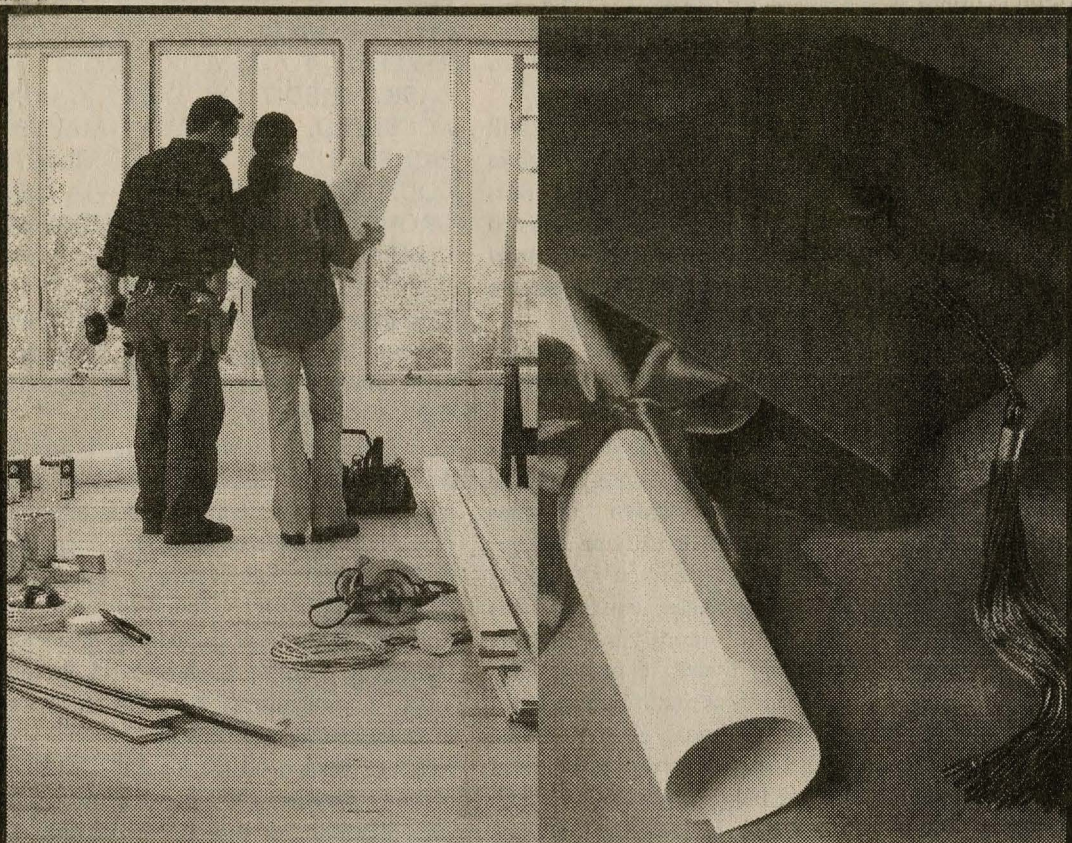
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