

In Asia, 'AIDS is slowly taking control of society'

by Mary Burdman

By the year 2000, a majority of the world's AIDS victims—projected by then to be 40 million AIDS-infected people and 10 million with the full-blown disease—will be Asians, the Asian Development Bank reported in its 1992 development outlook survey published this summer. The ADB survey stated that in some parts of Asia, “the population growth rate will either stagnate or fall, especially as the proportion of infected young women rises,” due to AIDS—a situation now only seen in Africa. AIDS, worst now in Thailand and India, is a disease of poverty in Asia as in Africa. “The poor, because of lack of alternative job opportunities, are over-represented in the commercial sex industry. Intravenous drug users also come mainly from low-income groups with limited education,” the ADB reported. These people are “also those who are the most ill-equipped to handle the effects of the disease once infected.” The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that developing countries account for over 90% of all new HIV infections.

Carl-Erik Wiberg, a U.N. Development Program regional representative in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, said that the AIDS pandemic will have a “tremendous social and economic impact” in Asia, putting big strains on family life, public health services, and economies, as increasing numbers of victims must stop work and require treatment.

In Washington this summer, Dr. Michael Merson, director of the AIDS program for the WHO, said that now “the pandemic is spreading as fast” in South and Southeast Asia “as it was a decade ago in sub-Saharan Africa.” With the speed at which AIDS is spreading in Asia, and the population density there, “we are expecting that some time in the mid-to late-1990s, more Asians will be newly infected each year than Africans.” Africa has 6.5 million people AIDS infected, followed by North America and South America, each continent with over 1 million infected.

Reports of the current number of AIDS infected in Asia vary. A.N. Malaviya, the head of the All India Institute of Medical Science, told United News of India on Oct. 29 that some 1.5 million people in the Asia-Pacific region are AIDS-infected, and approximately 2,000 more are contracting it every day. “Unless the AIDS epidemic is controlled immediately, this region will suffer more than any other part of the world,” Malaviya stated.

The WHO reported in February that at least 1 million

Asians are already AIDS-infected, and that, of the over 1 million adults newly infected with HIV in the past 10 months, one-quarter are in the Asia-Pacific region, most in South and Southeast Asia. There is “mounting apprehension about the growing pandemic in South and Southeast Asia,” WHO reported. The Asian region has over twice as many adults as sub-Saharan Africa, and “an even bigger potential for epidemic spread.”

AIDS was first detected in the Pacific in 1982 in Australia. WHO reported at its September Western Pacific regional conference that there are two factors causing alarm: the “extremely high rate of sexually transmitted diseases” in Asia, and the expansion of drug use. HIV infection has “exploded” in Thailand, spreading from drug users and female prostitutes to the general population in the last year. In 1987, less than 1% of drug users and female prostitutes were infected; by mid-1990, over 50% of drug users and 30-40% of female prostitutes were infected. In the city of Chiangmai, the infection rate among poorer prostitutes is over 70%.

The epidemic is spilling over to the rest of the region. Malaysia now has a high percentage of infected intravenous drug users in the states bordering Thailand, and the infection is spreading. Already two years ago, the Malaysian government began putting up huge signs on the border warning of the dangers of AIDS.

The trail of drugs from the opium-producing “Golden Triangle” in the Southeast Asian highlands is also now becoming a trail for AIDS infection. In the province of Yunnan, China, which borders Burma, Laos, and Vietnam, the government has already detected over 500 AIDS-infected people among drug users. The AIDS trail follows the two drug trails out of the Golden Triangle: one through southern China to Hong Kong, the other through Burma to Thailand and Malaysia.

Disaster in Thailand

The epicenter of AIDS in Asia, Thailand, could have 10% of its population (55 million people) AIDS infected by the year 2000, *Newsweek International* reported in its June 30 issue. AIDS experts at a U.N. Development Program-sponsored conference on AIDS in Kunming, China in late September, described Thailand as a country where, like Uganda, “AIDS is slowly taking control of society,” Reuters reported. The WHO estimates that 2-4 million Thais will be

infected by 2000, over 50% of them women, but a study by the Harvard University International AIDS Center says these figures are too low. A report by Rep. Jim McDermott (D-Wash.) to the U.S. Congress, entitled "On the AIDS Epidemic in Asia," said the figure by 2000 will be 3-6 million.

While AIDS was only first diagnosed in Thailand in 1984, the number now HIV-infected is put at 200-400,000 by official sources. Non-official estimates put current infection at 500,000, almost 1% of the population. Little is being done to halt its spread. The already-troubled Thai economy is heavily dependent on tourism, its biggest "industry" and foreign exchange earner, in which nominally illegal prostitution plays a big role. While the government reports the number of prostitutes in Thailand at 80,000, other reports say the number of female and male prostitutes is approximately 300,000. Sanphasit Koompraphant, executive director of the Thai Foundation for Children, puts the number of those employed in the entire "sex industry" at 800,000, which is close to 3% of the *total* Thai work force.

The economic and social effects of the epidemic are devastating, especially for women. Many thousands of Thai peasant girls, many as young as 13, have been tricked into becoming prostitutes in the cities. Word of the dangers, including AIDS, has gotten back to the countryside, however, and fewer and fewer Thais are becoming prostitutes, *Newsweek* reported. But Burmese and Chinese girls are taking their places.

Women have a tenfold greater risk of contracting AIDS from men than vice versa. At the current rate, 1.5 million Thai women will be HIV-positive by 2000, and so will one-third of their children.

Worst-case projections say 180,000 could be sick with AIDS by the year 2000, and 160,000 could die: This will be *one-third* of the deaths in Thailand. Few Thais have health insurance, and almost all AIDS victims are dependent on government support. Current government expenditure on health per person is only \$10 per year; costs per year per AIDS victim are at least \$1,000. Since most AIDS victims are young, each death represents a loss of 25 productive working years. A government-sponsored study says that, unless there is a drastic drop in the AIDS infection rate, Thailand's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) could fall by 10-20% over the next five years.

India next area of rapid spread

In India, where AIDS was first detected only six years ago, at least 1 million people are AIDS carriers, according to the McDermott report. A Madras expert, Dr. Jacob John, puts the level at 2.5 million. Projections for the year 2000 put the incidence of AIDS infection at 3-6 million people. This would be "only" approximately 0.6% of India's 850 million people, but the disease is spreading fast, especially, as in Thailand, among prostitutes and drug users. In 1986, only 1% of Bombay's 100,000 prostitutes were infected; now

it is 35%. In the state of Manipur, about 25% of some 40,000 drug addicts are infected. AIDS is also spread by the health system. Many laboratories routinely re-use needles when collecting blood. Impoverished Indians regularly sell their blood to earn money; in a random test of blood supplies in New Delhi last year, 499 units were found HIV-infected.

AIDS and drugs

In late September, the WHO and U.N. Development Program sponsored a conference on AIDS in Kunming, China, an indication of the Chinese government's concern about the situation. Despite claims of having eradicated drug addiction during the Maoist period, China now admits a rapidly growing drug problem, and with it comes AIDS. The official *China Daily* reported on Oct. 29 that the number of drug abusers in China has doubled since 1990. The Ministry of Public Health reported that China had registered 148,000 drug abusers by last June, twice the 1990 figure. The most widely used drugs are heroin and opium from southwestern regions which border the Golden Triangle. AIDS is spreading in the same region.

Dr. Georg Petersen, a WHO regional adviser on communicable diseases in the Asia-Pacific, said at the Kunming conference that "the percentage of new infections in Asia is probably going to be higher than Africa within the next several years. What is new now is that people within the Golden Triangle itself are using heroin, leaving a trail of HIV infection along the main drug transport lines to the outside world. It can spread very, very fast in this area. Asia is facing a very serious problem that is increasing rapidly."

China now has 932 confirmed cases of HIV infection, two-thirds of whom are drug addicts in southwestern Yunnan province—but this is the only region where the government has done much HIV screening. The rise is rapid: As of June 1, the reported number of cases was 708, with six deaths from AIDS. Health Ministry drugs officer Pan Xuetian has called for a new drive to increase public awareness of the dangers of drug abuse, with special attention on educating teenagers.

Other nations around the Golden Triangle are also endangered by AIDS. Burma, one of the world's poorest nations, is being infected from the Thai epidemic. Dr. Myo Thet Htoon, head of Burma's national AIDS program, said at the Kunming conference that by June 1992, Burma had identified 4,200 cases of HIV infection and 16 cases of AIDS, which he called "just the tip of the iceberg. Trade routes are having an effect on the epidemic in my country."

Laos has recorded 11 HIV carriers and one AIDS death, and Vietnam has recorded five AIDS infections. AIDS is also becoming a problem in Cambodia, due, among other things, to the presence of the U.N. "peacekeeping" forces there. WHO reports that about 0.76% of Cambodia's blood donors have tested positive for HIV this year, a tenfold increase over 1991.