

Prevention 'focus of HIV fight'

Politicians and campaigners have pledged to focus on HIV prevention to stop the spread of the virus.

The UK pledged £27.5m for work around the world on World Aids Day.

And EU ministers issued the first pan-European pledge of their commitment to limit the spread of HIV/Aids, the world's fourth biggest killer.

They backed efforts to give people around the world better access to condoms and effective information on how to reduce their risk of infection.

More than 40m people around the world are living with HIV/Aids. Five million people have been newly infected so far this year.

The litany of broken promises now rings hollow against the unrelenting advance of the epidemic throughout the world."

Marcel van Soest, World Aids Campaign

The UK government announced it is to give £20m to the International Aids Vaccine Initiative and £7.5m to the International Partnership of Microbicides.

Prime Minister Tony Blair said: "The Aids crisis represents a human tragedy.

"Today's funding looks to the long-term and will encourage the development of vaccines and microbicides that will benefit both the developing and developed world."

'Firm commitments needed'

In their statement, the EU health ministers said: "To be successful, HIV prevention must utilise all approaches known to be effective, not implementing one or a few selective actions in isolation.

"We also believe that these interventions must be designed to reach all vulnerable people."

They added: "HIV prevention requires that governments and communities have the courage to confront difficult issues in an open and informed way."

Leading HIV/Aids campaign groups in the UK, coming together as the UK Civil Society on HIV/Aids, welcomed the EU pledge.

Mannie Ncube, of Student Partnership Worldwide, said: "As the world's largest donor to HIV/Aids, the EU's actions could save millions of lives.

"However, in a month's time the EU presidency changes hands and, without firm financial commitments and a timetable of action, there is a danger that progress won't be fast enough and millions more will die."

The WHO, criticised for failing to meet a target for 3m people to get access to anti-retroviral drugs by the end of this year, said progress was being made.

Dr Jim Yong Kim, director of the WHO's HIV/Aids department, said at least 1.5m would get the drugs.

He added: "More than 50 countries have doubled, or more, the numbers of people getting anti-retroviral therapy."

'Whatever it takes'

The children's organisation Unicef called for more pregnant women with HIV to receive services including anti-retrovirals to reduce the risk of their child being affected by the virus.

Less than 10% of women who need them are getting them, it says.

Currently, more than 600,000 children are estimated to become infected with HIV each year, over 90 per cent of them because they are born to mothers infected with the virus.

In a statement to mark World Aids Day, Peter Piot, director of UNAids, added: "With a crisis as unprecedented as Aids, we cannot afford to neglect any vital front.

"We must do whatever it takes to accelerate the pace of development of women-controlled prevention technologies, new generations of effective treatments, and a vaccine against HIV.

"And we must address the deeper-rooted factors that are driving the virus, including gender and income inequality."

But the World Aids Campaign called for action, not words.

Executive director Marcel van Soest said: "The litany of broken promises now rings hollow against the unrelenting advance of the epidemic throughout the world."

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