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1.6 Million HIV Infections in Latin America

by LADB Staff

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About 1.6 million people in Latin America live infected with the virus that leads to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), while 430,000 in the Caribbean have the disease, according to a report released July 6 by the UN HIV/AIDS Program (UNAIDS).

The report, the most detailed UNAIDS has done in its brief history thanks to new methodology used, says that Caribbean countries continue to have the highest percentage of AIDS in their populations. This finding corresponds with European groups that say AIDS is the greatest threat to development in Caribbean nations, as well as in African and Pacific countries. By comparison, Canada and the US together have 1 million people suffering from the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), and infection rates showed an increase in the US.

The reports said that half the new infections in recent years occurred among African-Americans. In Western Europe, 580,000 people are living with HIV compared to 540,000 in 2001. With 38 million people living with the disease worldwide, Latin America's infected population accounts for about 4% of the global total.

Epidemic prevalent in Caribbean, more localized elsewhere

The UNAIDS report says the epidemic in Latin America is concentrated among populations at high risk of HIV infection injecting drug users and homosexual men. Low national prevalence hides some serious local epidemics. For example, in Brazil, the region's most populous country, national prevalence is below 1%, but in certain cities 60% of injecting drug users are infected with HIV.

Three Caribbean countries have national HIV prevalence rates of at least 3%: the Bahamas, Haiti, and Trinidad and Tobago. The Caribbean epidemic is mainly heterosexual, says the report, and in many places it is concentrated among sex workers. But it is also spreading in the general population. The worst affected country is Haiti where national prevalence is around 5.6%, the highest outside sub-Saharan Africa.

Almost 84,000 people died from AIDS in Latin America in the past year, said the report, while it calculated that another 200,000 in the region contracted the infection. The report said that the disease principally affects men between the ages of 15 and 24, about 0.8% of whom have AIDS, and women of that age range have a lesser percentage of infection at 0.5%.

In Latin America, the majority of those infected contracted the virus by using contaminated syringes to inject drugs or through sexual contact, with homosexual relations among men causing the highest number of sexually transmitted infections. Nevertheless, the contagion depends on the region in which the disease is spreading.

In Central America, AIDS spreads mostly through sexual contact, as much between homosexuals as between heterosexuals. Sexual relations between men also make up the predominant transmission of the contagion in Colombia and Peru, said UNAIDS.

In Brazil, the largest and most populous country in the region, the infection rate is generally low, but in cities it is growing significantly. The 60% infection rate among drug addicts in large Brazilian cities alarmed the authors of the UN report. The reports said 35,000 people died from AIDS in the Caribbean last year, while 52,000 contracted the disease.

The disease seriously affects the Dominican Republic although, in contrast to its neighbor Haiti, the number of cases is declining thanks to prevention campaigns. Cuba has a low infection rate, with prevention methods internationally recognized as effective. The epidemic in Caribbean countries has a predominantly heterosexual origin and is related to prostitution. UNAIDS said that some countries, which went unidentified, do not include protection measures for drug addicts who use needles nor for homosexual men in their efforts against AIDS.

Efforts to contain virus failing

The release of the report preceded the XV International AIDS Conference held June 11-16 in Bangkok, Thailand, a country that has become an important center of the pandemic. Globally, about 5 million people contracted the disease in the past year, according to the report. UNAIDS said the epidemic had progressed more in the past year than in any other period, despite efforts to stem its spread. Between 2001 and 2003, the number of people in the world living with the disease went from 31 to 38 million.

"In spite of increases in financing and political commitment to the progress made in recent years in the treatment of HIV, the AIDS epidemic continues to leave the world response behind," said the director of UNAIDS, Peter Piot.

Asia was the continent where the disease grew the most and with greater speed in the last twelve months, according to the report. In 2003 alone, the number of infected people on the Asian continent, where 60% of the world population lives, increased to 1.1 million people, principally in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

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