

## AIDS IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

*Given that countries in Asia and the Pacific make up 60% of the world's population, even low HIV prevalence rates translate into millions of HIV infections.*

- In Asia and the Pacific, some 8.2 million people are estimated to be living with HIV – second largest number after sub-Saharan Africa -- and 1.2 million people were newly infected in 2004.
- The number of women living with HIV has increased by 20% since 2002, to around 2.3 million. AIDS claimed some 540,000 lives in Asia and the Pacific in 2004.
- The pace and severity of the epidemics in Asia and the Pacific vary. In parts of the region, 1 in 20 adults are already infected with the virus, and numerous countries possess the ingredients for a rapid escalation of the epidemic.
- East Asia is facing the fastest-growing epidemic in the world, due to the rapid spread of HIV in China, Indonesia and Viet Nam.
- While some countries were hit early (Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand), others are only now starting to experience rapidly expanding epidemics (Indonesia, Nepal, Viet Nam, and several provinces in China).
- HIV infection levels appear to be low in many parts of the Pacific, but once HIV makes its way into the tiny populations of island nations, the epidemic could spread rapidly.
- Countries like Bangladesh, East Timor, Japan, Laos, Pakistan, and the Philippines are still seeing extremely low levels of HIV prevalence, even among people at high risk of infection. They have golden opportunities to pre-empt serious outbreaks of the epidemic if urgent action is taken.
- HIV has now spread to all of China's 31 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities. Much of the current spread of HIV in China is attributable to injecting drug use and paid sex. However, sexual transmission of HIV from injecting drug users to their partners is rising.
- Drug injection is the strongest driver of HIV infection in many parts of Asia. There are signs that injecting drug use is playing a bigger role in India's epidemics than previously thought. About 5.1 million people in India are living with HIV and serious epidemics are underway in several states. In the southern city of Chennai, for example, 26% of drug injectors were already infected with HIV when a sentinel site was established there in 2000; by 2003, 64% were infected. In Tamil Nadu, HIV prevalence of 50% has been found among sex workers.
- In Indonesia, one in two injecting drug users in Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, now test positive for HIV, while in far-flung cities such as Pontianak more than 70% of drug injectors who request HIV tests are discovering that they are HIV-positive.
- Papua New Guinea has the highest HIV prevalence in the Pacific with 1.7% of adults aged 15 to 49 infected, or close to 50,000. More than twice as many young women (aged 15–24) as men have been diagnosed with HIV. A high incidence of rape, sexual aggression and other forms of violence against women appear to be aiding the epidemic's growth.
- A large amount of new HIV infections in Asia and the Pacific occur when men buy sex—and an estimated 5% - 10% of men in the region do so. This makes commercial sex a large and lucrative industry in Asia. Many of these men are married or in steady relationships and

therefore risk not just contracting HIV, but also passing it on to their wives and partners.

- The majority of sex workers who did not use condoms with their last client in places where condoms were easily available said it was because their clients refused to use them. Sex workers in China's Yunnan province have reported that they earn about 60% more for sex without a condom.
- According to a 2003 survey, knowledge of HIV status in South and South-East Asia is minimal and targeted prevention programmes reach only 19% of sex workers, 5% of injecting drug users, and only 2% of men who have sex with men.

### **AIDS response in Asia and the Pacific**

- To date, the AIDS response in Asia and the Pacific has been inadequate. Without immediate action on AIDS, the region could witness an additional 12 million new infections between 2005 and 2010.
- However, with more than 99% of the region's inhabitants still uninfected, the potential exists to prevent a major expansion of the epidemic. If prevention programmes are urgently scaled-up, 6 million new HIV infections could be prevented in the region.
- Countries that have introduced large-scale prevention programmes addressing sexual transmission of HIV have seen significant reductions in risk behaviour and have recorded declining levels of new HIV infections. This shows that countries that choose to provide prevention services on a large scale to those people most in need can bring their epidemics under control.
- In Cambodia, large-scale prevention programmes have resulted in fewer men visiting sex workers and a significant rise in condom use in commercial sex. The combined effect has been a steep drop in sexually transmitted infections and a steady decline in HIV prevalence.
- Bangladesh has succeeded in reducing the spread of HIV among vulnerable groups, particularly sex workers. Without these interventions, HIV prevalence among sex workers could have been as high as 10% compared to the current prevalence of 1%.
- In China, there are signs that efforts to boost public knowledge about HIV are working, but much improvement is needed. A 2003 survey found that two in five Chinese men and women could not name a single way to protect themselves against infection.
- In Thailand, an early commitment to prevention made the country one of the world's greatest AIDS success stories with HIV prevalence declining year after year. However, there are fears that decreasing prevention efforts may provoke a resurgence of HIV. Prevention programmes targeting injecting drug users, which remain a driving force of HIV, have received only limited government funding.
- Some countries have committed themselves to drastically expand access to HIV treatment – including Cambodia and China (which has pledged free treatment), India and Indonesia. But to date only 14% of the 1.1 million people in Asia needing antiretroviral treatment are receiving it.
- By 2007, AIDS funding in the region will be more than twice what it was in 2003. But at US\$1.6 billion, it will still be less than half of the US\$5 billion needed.
- To reverse the spread of AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, HIV prevention, care and treatment programmes targeting vulnerable groups -- young people, migrants, injecting drug users, sex workers and men who have sex with men -- must be urgently scaled up.

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