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Nam needs N\$250m a year to fight AIDS

CHRISTOF MALETSKY

NAMIBIA has launched a programme to market opportunities available for businesses to team up with the health sector to fight the HIV-AIDS scourge.

Under the Menu for Partnership Options, the country needs N\$250 million a year to expand and strengthen its response to the epidemic.

The menu, containing information on AIDS programmes in the country, was first launched at the World Economic Forum's Africa Economic Summit in Durban last month by Health Minister Dr Libertina Amathila.

Amathila said yesterday that various local organisations had already been approached for possible funding since June 5, but appealed to local business community to get more involved.

President of the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NCCI), Dr Leake Hangala, said many businesses were ignorant about the impact of HIV-AIDS on the workforce, while others continued to see it as merely a health issue.

An NCCI survey found that some in the private sector were reluctant to deal with HIV-AIDS and that an average of 35 per cent of companies outside Windhoek had no programmes in place to prevent HIV.

Yet, he said, many companies experienced a high rate of deaths and absenteeism due to sickness and funerals.

"Many have serious misconceptions about their role. Some of my colleagues in executive positions believe that only the Government must address the issue. They merely refer to condom distribution and posters when they talk about their HIV-AIDS programmes," Hangala said.

Some businesses, he said, claimed they could always replace their sick workforce with new recruits.

Hangala warned that an unhealthy and ineffective workforce could lead to high medical costs, loss in productivity, absenteeism and a general decline in investment in Namibia.

Dr Amathila said hospitals and other health facilities were recording an unprecedented number of AIDS-related deaths and hospitalisation.

She warned that worst would come in the next 10 years as more people infected years ago would be dying. "We need many more resources," she said.

Emma Tuahepa-Kamapoha, Chairperson of Lironga Eparu, an organisation of people living positively with HIV-AIDS, agreed with the Minister.

"To many of us, today is a day of celebration. I see business partners coming in and we hope that things will get better (for people living with HIV)," she said.

The World Economic Forum, United Nations Foundation and the Joint United Nations HIV-AIDS Programme (UNAIDS) invited Namibia and Ukraine to use the Durban meeting to campaign for private sector funding for their HIV-AIDS programmes.

The Menu for Partnership Options states that Namibia will need around N\$20 million to roll out its Mother-to-Child-Transmission programme to 28 hospitals in the country.

Also included in the figure is N\$3 million to train 560 health workers at each of the 28 hospitals, N\$1,8 million to refurbish all sites to accommodate voluntary counselling and testing, N\$13 million for equipment, commodities and laboratory tests for one year, and N\$330 000 for Nevirapine for 7 000 mothers and 7 000 babies.

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