

HIV/AIDS in Burma and USAID Involvement

According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Burma is classified as one of Asia's HIV/AIDS epicenters. With an HIV/AIDS prevalence of 2 percent in the adult population, it ranks third among hardest hit nations in the region, behind Cambodia and Thailand. Decades of economic decline and political isolation have contributed to low investment in health care and increased high-risk behaviors, which favor the spread of HIV in Burma.

The National AIDS Control Program (NACP) reported in 1999 that 54 percent of injecting drug users tested positive for HIV. As early as 1989, 73 percent of injecting drug users in the capital of Rangoon were reported to be HIV-positive. Prevalence levels in this group currently range from 50 to 93 percent, depending on the region. Growing evidence indicates that Burmese drug users, together with migrant workers and sex workers, are major carriers of HIV into India, Thailand, and China.

Thirty-seven percent of sex workers and 10 percent of persons with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are also infected with HIV.

Condom use is low in Burma and remains an underutilized method of HIV/AIDS prevention. The sale of condoms was illegal in Burma prior to 1993, and today the cost of a packet of four condoms is equivalent to an average month's wages. Public discussion of condoms within certain ethnic groups is considered unacceptable.

Burma's epidemic has spread from groups at high risk of infection to the general population. The NACP reported in 1999 that the major mode of HIV transmission occurred through heterosexual contact. The program also reported that 2.4 percent of pregnant women, 2.2 percent of new military recruits, and 1 percent of blood donors tested positive for HIV. All 14 states and divisions in Burma have reported HIV/AIDS cases.

- By the end of 1999, the Ministry of Health reported a total of 30,372 HIV/AIDS cases.
- According to UNAIDS, by the end of 1999, 530,000 adults and children were living with HIV/AIDS.
- By the end of 1999, an estimated 43,000 children under 15 had lost their mother or both parents due to AIDS.



- In 1999, HIV/AIDS prevalence among pregnant women in Rangoon averaged a little over 1 percent. In the southern city of Kawthaung, prevalence in this group was reported at close to 8 percent.
- Prevalence among Rangoon’s blood donors remained below 1 percent between 1992 and 1999.
- As of September 1999, prevalence among sex workers in Rangoon and Mandalay ranged from 37 percent to 57 percent.
- As of September 1999, HIV/AIDS prevalence was 17 percent among females with STIs attending clinics in Rangoon. Prevalence was 15 percent among male patients.

NATIONAL RESPONSE

In 1988, when the first HIV case was reported in Burma, the government established a National AIDS Committee (NAC) under the leadership of the National Health Committee.

In 1990, an HIV/AIDS control workplan was developed and implemented under the title, Medium Term Plan I & II. From 1996 to 1999, the National AIDS Programme, in association with the World Health Organization (WHO), led peer education programs for injecting drug users, and disseminated HIV/AIDS information and education materials to drug users.

The NAC was restructured and strengthened in February 1998 to better respond to the country’s epidemic. The Burmese government has adopted a multisectoral approach to fighting HIV/AIDS, including a multilingual public education campaign carried out by several Ministries. Health officials have implemented HIV/AIDS training programs for health personnel, and the government established an “opium-free zone” along the Chinese border to limit HIV transmission via injecting drug use.

The National AIDS Programme also focuses on carrying out blood safety programs, control of STIs, behavior surveillance, HIV surveillance (conducted twice a year), training of community-based AIDS support volunteers, cross-border prevention programs, and counseling services.

In 2000, the total amount of funds from all sources dedicated to HIV/AIDS programming in Burma was approximately \$3 million. Burma’s national AIDS budget in 1999 was approximately \$40,000.

USAID SUPPORT

The **United States Agency of International Development (USAID)** does not currently provide assistance directly to Burma. However, USAID and the U.S. State Department do provide assistance, including HIV/AIDS education, to displaced Burmese populations located along the border with Thailand.

United Nations agencies such as WHO, UNDP, UNICEF, and UNAIDS are supporting programs to

Key Population, Health, and Socioeconomic Indicators		
Population	45.1 million	WHO 1999
Growth Rate	1.9	WHO 1999
Life Expectancy	Males: 58.4 Females: 59.2	WHO 1999
Total Fertility Rate	2.3	WHO 1999
Infant Mortality Rate	78 per 1,000 live births	World Bank 1999
Maternal Mortality Ratio	230 per 100,000 live births	UNICEF 2000
GNP per capita (US\$)	N/A	N/A
Govt. health expenditure as % GDP	2.6%	WHO 1997
Adult Literacy	Males: 89% Females: 80%	World Bank 1999

improve HIV/AIDS sentinel surveillance and treatment of STIs, and build capacity within the national AIDS program.

CHALLENGES

According to the Asian Harm Reduction Network and UNAIDS, Burma faces the following challenges in confronting its HIV/AIDS epidemic:

- Expanding harm reduction programs for injecting drug users, and mitigating government penalties on injecting drug user and sex worker populations so that these groups can be reached with HIV/AIDS educational and prevention materials;
- Implementing ongoing HIV/AIDS assessment, surveillance, and testing of the population;
- Decreasing the trafficking of women into the sex industry, which increases their vulnerability to HIV/AIDS;
- Mobilizing political commitment to confront the epidemic; and
- Confronting social taboos against public discussion of HIV/AIDS-related issues.

SELECTED LINKS AND CONTACTS

1. National AIDS Programme, Ministry of Health, Department of Health, Rangoon, Burma, Tel: 285 245, 290 038.
2. UNDP National AIDS Programme - P.O. Box 650, UNDP, Rangoon, Myanmar, Website: <http://www.mm.undp.org/> or Website for the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific: <http://www.undp.org/rbap/>
3. WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia, World Health House, Indraprastha Estate, Mahatma Gandhi Road, New Delhi 110002, India, Telephone: (0091) 11.337.0804 or 11.337.8805, Fax: (0091) 11.337.9507 or 11.337.0972 Website: www.whosea.org

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