

Collective action to curb AIDS

STAR

The sixth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (Icaap) will go on amid the uncertainties in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States as it is vital to remain focused on addressing the HIV/AIDS threat in this region, reports IVY SOON.

NO MATTER how grim the statistics or how harrowing the pictures are, AIDS remains a largely invisible threat in the Asia-Pacific region. Its modes of transmissions are linked to the most intimate and private acts, and the discrimination that plagues people living with HIV/AIDS have rendered it an epidemic met with denial and silence.

The 6.4 million HIV victims in the Asia-Pacific are somewhat dwarfed by the 25 million Africans living with the afflic-

tion, and represents a low prevalence rate. Still, experts have warned that Asia is a potential time bomb, an Africa waiting to happen.

"The challenge in Asia is not only to keep the epidemic small, but to keep it smaller still. Low prevalence rates in Asia could translate to huge numbers in Asia's dense population," points out Benjamin Brown who manages the UN Development Programme's Asia-Pacific Regional Project on HIV and Development.

In India, where only seven adults in 1,000 are infected, 3.7 million people were living with HIV/AIDS at the beginning of the millennium - more than in any other country except in South Africa.

"China has also officially recognised that the number of those infected are higher than their initially thought. The oft-cited figure is 10 million HIV victims by 2010," says Brown. Myanmar is already in the throes of a major epidemic while Cambodia has to contend with the highest prevalence rate in the region.

In Papua New Guinea, HIV infection is increasing at a rate of about 30% a year. Many fear that the island nation's outbreak could resemble that of southern Africa.

Although HIV is spreading fastest in South Asia and South-East Asia, much of the focus has been on Africa's dire situation in international conferences and funding allocations.

Therefore, the sixth Icaap to be held in Melbourne from Oct 5-10 is deemed the best forum to examine and address the epidemic here.

More than 3,000 academics, community workers, doctors, scientists, activists, and the victims will be participating in the biennial conference.

The theme for the sixth Icaap is "Breaking Down Barriers", in recognising the need for more realistic and effective programmes in prevention, treatment, care and support unhindered by social, cultural, economic and political barriers.

The conference organisers have replaced the traditional disciplinary tracks with four major themes in an attempt to promote cross-disciplinary dialogue. The four themes are treatment and care, prevention, socio-economic determinants and, sexuality and

gender.

"Since the fifth Icaap hosted by us two years ago, access to treatment has become an important issue. It will also run through the conference in Melbourne," says Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir.

Recent developments such as the decision of 39 pharmaceutical companies to drop their bid to stop the importation of cheap AIDS drugs to South Africa have also spurred the campaign for better access to treatment.

Access to available HIV/AIDS therapy, particularly for women and children, will be a dominant theme.

There will be discussions on strategies for developing countries to improve access to anti-retroviral drugs.

In the short term, however, the most important treatment issue in this region may be access to prophylaxis to treat opportunistic infections (illnesses such as tuberculosis that occurs when the immune system is ravaged by HIV).

Young people from across the Asia-Pacific will also be sharing their perspectives about the epidemic; addressing issues such as drug use, homosexuality, sex education, children and sex work, discrimination and prevention.

They will also be formulating the Icaap Youth Charter that will reflect the beliefs and realities of the region's youth with regards to HIV/AIDS.

Most importantly, the conference will be an opportunity to share experiences and knowledge and to learn from one another.

Malaysia, which hosted the last Icaap, will be participating actively in the Melbourne conference. A delegation of about 60 - from the public sector, non-governmental organisations, community workers, the victims - will be taking part in the sixth Icaap.

Assoc Prof Adeeba Kamarulzaman from University Malaya is delivering a plenary speech on treatment and care. Azrul Mohd Khalib from Malaysian AIDS Council will be speaking at the Youth Symposium and Daniel Lew from Malaysian Care will be talking about working with injecting drug users. Malaysian AIDS Foundation executive director Indra Nadchatram will be holding a skills building workshop on fundraising.