

Military to Join Fight Against AIDS in Papua New Guinea

In the impoverished South Pacific nation of Papua New Guinea, the army has begun distributing 43 million condoms to help stop the spread of AIDS. It is estimated that two percent of the population is either infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, or has contracted the deadly disease. But there are warnings that the epidemic could increase substantially if current trends continue.

Papua New Guinea has one of the fastest growing HIV infection rates in the world. Some studies have warned that half-a-million people - or about 10% of the population - will be living with HIV and AIDS by the year 2025.

Most infections are spread by heterosexual intercourse, with younger women and older men disproportionately affected.

The military is helping to promote the safe sex message by distributing more than 40 million condoms provided by Australian relief agencies.

Don Baxter from the Australian Federation of AIDS Organizations says in a vast and rugged nation the army's support is vital. "I think Papua New Guinea is perhaps the most difficult country in the world to mount a national HIV response. It has over 700 different language groups, no national transport system to speak of and few government services that actually operate outside of the capital, Port Moresby. And so in PNG though the military is one of the few organizations which actually can operate nationally effectively," he said.

In a further effort to spread the safe sex message, hotel guests in Papua New Guinea will soon find complimentary condoms alongside the free soap and shampoo in their rooms.

A local education group has reached an agreement with more than 90 hotels and guest houses to distribute two million free condoms.

With more than 600 islands and an immensely diverse culture, Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare describes the island nation as a "paradise."

But the prime minister also admits that in a country where HIV and AIDS victims are often abandoned by their families, fear of the disease could make it almost impossible to stop its spread.

Some Papua New Guineans associate AIDS and HIV with witchcraft and sorcery and there

PNG: Fight Against AIDS

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have been reports of infected people being thrown into rivers, buried alive in graves or being starved to death.

Human rights organizations have reported more than 50 cases of sorcery-related deaths in Papua New Guinea in 2008.

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