

Nations mark world AIDS day with marches, rallies

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — Southern African countries marked World AIDS Day on Sunday with hopes that the region, which has the highest rate of HIV positive people on the planet, can slow the spread of the disease.

There are 42 million HIV positive people worldwide, with sub-Saharan Africa home to 75 percent of them, according to UNAIDS, the U.N.'s AIDS agency.

South Africa has more HIV positive people than any other country in the world. Figures released by the government more than two years ago showed that 4.7 million people — one in nine — were infected, and the figure today is believed to be substantially higher.

The number of people with AIDS in Asia threatens to reach epidemic levels, and activists there also tried to raise awareness of the disease and how to prevent it. Events were also held in Cuba, Brazil, Peru and several other countries.

South Africa's government had come under fire for not doing enough to combat the AIDS epidemic, and it has recently shown signs of taking the issue more seriously.

This year the government almost tripled its anti-AIDS budget to \$108 million, and plans to up to \$194 million in the next financial year.

Tony Leon, leader of the main opposition Democratic Alliance, said South African women's average life expectancy would fall from 54 to 38 over the next 10 years and over 2 million children would be orphaned by AIDS.

"South Africa's fight against AIDS has been massively hampered and harmed by government's dithering, denial and dissent from the orthodoxies associated with the disease," he said.

President Thabo Mbeki has questioned the link between HIV and AIDS in the past, but kept from commenting on the issue over the last few months.

Countries across Asia commemorated World AIDS Day with events to raise awareness of the disease amid warnings that the number of infected people in China and India, the world's two most populous nations, will reach epidemic levels.

Carrying banners and signs, thousands took to the streets in Hanoi and Bangkok on Sunday to promote AIDS awareness. India staged a marathon to raise public knowledge of the disease, while Beijing's imposing legislative hall hosted an awareness event.

"Silence is death when it comes to fighting HIV/AIDS," said Jordan Ryan, the U.N. resident

coordinator in Vietnam, at a rally in Hanoi that drew 3,000 people. "It's time to tear down the walls of stigma and silence."

The United Nations has estimated that at the end of 2001, 6.6 million people throughout Asia were living with HIV or AIDS, including about 1 million newly infected that year.

In India, where some 4 million people are infected with HIV, officials in the eastern city of Bhubaneswar on Sunday unfurled a record-long 3.7-mile-long banner to mark the day.

In Thailand, a prison in Thailand opened its doors to family and friends of inmates in the final stages of the disease, the *Bangkok Post* newspaper reported Sunday.

World AIDS day events were low key in most southern African countries.

In Malawi, where about 9 percent of the population is HIV positive, the government warned that AIDS was decimating the civil service and the economy.

"Every day we are burying our workers, our teachers, our doctors and other professionals," Vice President Justin Malewezi said in a statement issued together with the findings of a new study on the impact of AIDS in Malawi.

The study found that high schools had to replace 77 percent of their staff every year because teachers die or are too ill to work.

In politically troubled Zimbabwe, President Robert Mugabe acknowledged that 2.2 million of the country's 13 million people were HIV positive, and that 700,000 children had been orphaned by AIDS.

"The impact of this tragedy has been such that each and every one of us knows of a relative, a loved one or a friend who has either died of the epidemic or is living with it," he said.

The human rights group Amnesty International said Sunday that millions of people are doomed to early deaths because they can't afford treatment for AIDS, and urged the United Nations to move quickly on its goal of reversing the pandemic by 2015.

"Those who are on the social margins of society, who are denied access to their most basic human rights — to freedom from discrimination, to education, to physical integrity, to health care and to economic security — are the most vulnerable to HIV infection," Amnesty said.

In Brazil on Friday, 800 high school students placed 15,000 red ribbons before the health ministry to symbolize the number of people in the country who became infected with HIV this year.

“Silence is death when it comes to fighting HIV/AIDS. It's time to tear down the walls of stigma and silence.”

— Jordan Ryan
U.N. resident coordinator

NEWS IN BRIEF

Taliban comment by bus driver prompts police investigation

MARLBORO, N.J. (AP) — Passengers on a Greyhound bus said the driver told them he was taking them "to the Taliban" after they criticized his meandering route Saturday night, prompting a massive police response.

The New York-bound bus hit heavy traffic soon after leaving Philadelphia, and the driver took several alternate routes to find less congested roads, said passenger Sally Weisbrot, 30.

"People were angry and making fun of the driver, yelling 'Do you know what you're doing up there? Do you know where you're going?' He clearly was annoyed," she said.

Weisbrot said the driver then shot back: "I'm taking you to the Taliban."

She said the driver was only joking because he was upset, but some people panicked and called 911 on their cell phones. Within minutes, 18 police cars surrounded the bus and pulled it over, she said.

Dara Salcman, a passenger from New York, said passengers were ordered to get off the bus with their hands in the air. Officers had their guns pointed at the bus, she said.

The bus driver was charged with creating a false public alarm, Marlboro Police Capt. Brian Hall said. He was expected to be released Saturday night on a summons.

"Needless to say, the comment that was made by the bus driver was inappropriate, especially in today's world," Hall said. "He said he didn't mean it; he was just frustrated."

Jamille Bradfield, a spokeswoman for Dallas-based Greyhound, said the company was cooperating with authorities.

Navy captain and best-selling author dies of cancer at 84

WASHINGTON (AP) — Edward Latimer "Ned" Beach, the U.S. Navy captain whose 1960 record for circumnavigating the globe in a submarine still stands and who wrote the best-selling undersea thriller "Run Silent, Run Deep," died Sunday from cancer. He was 84.

Beach earned 10 decorations for gallantry in World War II, including the Navy Cross, for his role in sinking Japanese ships in shallow waters just miles from the enemy coast.

The drama of the cramped quarters of a submarine at war was the basis for his best-selling 1955 novel, "Run Silent, Run Deep," about a clash between a revenge-obsessed captain and his crew. He wrote it while working as Naval aide to President Eisenhower.

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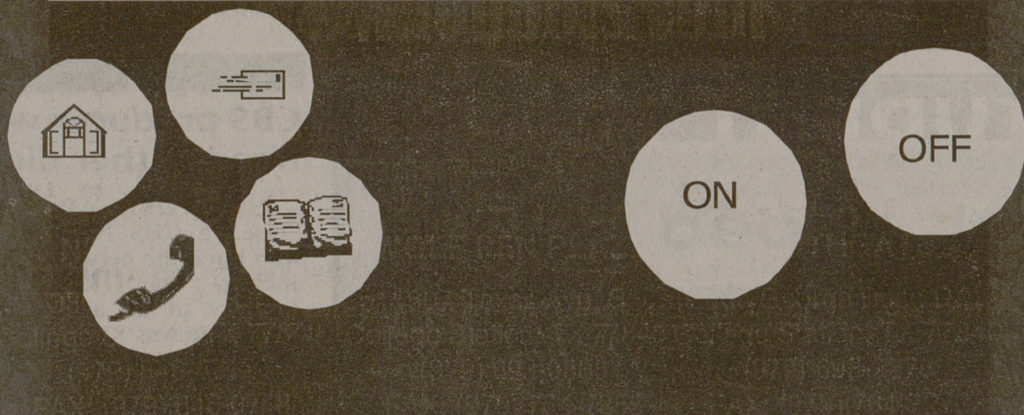
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