

Antiretrovirals are still elusive

By Jennifer Bakyawa

In June, the Uganda Access to Essential Medicines Coalition held a press conference to express their concerns about President George W Bush's visit to Uganda.

At the press conference, Constance B. Odhiambo was angry!

She wanted to walk to Entebbe to show Bush the true face of HIV positive people. Odhiambo is HIV positive.

When Bush arrived in Uganda, it was not only people such as Odhiambo who wanted him to explain certain issues, activists also wanted audience with him, especially on his pledge of \$15bn to 14 countries in Sub Saharan Africa and the Caribbean published in the press.

Bush's pledge of early last year is to help with diagnosis, treatment and prevention of AIDS in these countries within five years. About \$1 billion of it will next year, go to the UN Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria on condition other donors match the US share.

More than a year later a US House of Representatives Panel finally approved \$2 billion for Aids spending. This is less than \$1bn less, according to Agency France Presse (AFP).

Uganda considered worldwide as a success story in the HIV/AIDS fight, is one of the countries to benefit from Bush's pledge.

However, it still has high HIV/AIDS figures.

According to the Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), Epidemiological Fact Sheet 2002 Update there were about 110,000 children and 510,000 adults living with HIV in Uganda by the end of 2001; 280,000 of which were women. About 880,000 children were estimated to be Aids orphans at the time.

The UNAIDS also estimates that 230 people in Uganda die daily due to HIV/AIDS. About 84,000 people died in 2001.

Ms. Hope Mwesigwa from Ministry of Public Service told an HIV/AIDS sensitization workshop for government employers in Kampala that a December survey indicates that at least 3 percent of public servants died of Aids related causes between 1995 and 1999.

The figures are still high partly because the county



Grace Tumuheirwe was raped by an HIV/AIDS infected relative by a relative. Many in her state need antiretroviral drugs to keep them going (File photo).

cannot provide cheap or free antiretroviral (ARVs) drugs for its nationals.

In Uganda, of the estimated 1.5 million People Living with HIV/AIDS (PLWAs); about 150,000 need ARVs, according to the Uganda Access to Essential Medicines Coalition.

However, only between 10,000 to 15,000 are accessing the drugs.

Ms. Florence Mahoro from the National Forum of PLWAs in Uganda says relatives and friends support majority of people getting ARVs.

Many people, out of desperation, have started on the drugs. Some have failed to sustain them. Others have sacrificed meaningful shelter, clothing, nutrition and education in favour of the drugs.

Says Mahoro: "We need all these people alive. Access to drugs for treatment of opportunistic infections and ARVs prolong life. Every single soul is precious and we should not lose it when we can afford to save it."

In June last year, the Director General of the Uganda Aids Commission said at the launch of the Uganda Red Cross HIV/AIDS anti stigma campaign in Kampala that about 100,000 people in Uganda will be receiving ARVs by the end of 2003.

Today, he says, due to high prices, training and infrastructure requirements, the figures remain low.

Kihumuro says most people receive generic drugs imported from several countries, though nations with patent protection have also agreed

to further lower prices.

The Director General of Health Services, Dr. Francis Omaswa told Parliament recently that government will in a few years, afford to run a free ARV programme, to cater for about 100,000 to 150,000 people. It will cost about \$30m to \$40 per year. The money will be sourced from government and other international organisations.

"We want to start very soon," said Omaswa. "If the US's 15bn is approved quickly, we may even start within 12 months."

The Global Fund has been approved another \$36m for Uganda to spend on Aids programmes; out of which, \$9m is for Aids drugs.

Until trained personnel and infrastructure to follow up the PLWAs on drugs are in place, a vacuum still remains.

Some US international pharmaceutical companies have allowed developing countries to manufacture their patented drugs on condition they have strong property intellectual laws. The laws would allow the countries to only manufacture the drugs with permission from the pharmaceuticals.

Says Arthur Mpeirwe of the Coalition: "Poor countries like Uganda cannot afford a similar level of intellectual property protection like US or other developed countries...."

During his visit to South Africa, Bush said a way for the drug companies to protect their intellectual property rights should be found.

"We will continue to work with South Africa and other

countries, to see if we can reach a common sense policy that, on one hand protects intellectual property rights, and on the other makes life saving drugs more widely available at reasonable costs." AFP quoted Bush.

However, the Coalition argues that introduction of generic drugs led to a drop of prices of Aids drugs from over \$4000 to about \$ 300 annually.

"This has [increased the] number of people accessing the drugs from 500 to 15,000 in four years. However, the drugs are still too expensive for most Ugandans," the Coalition said in an open letter to Bush, published in Ugandan press.

"Patent protection is one of the causes of this high price," Mpeirwe said. "Uganda needs a law that will enable it to make drugs affordable to all categories of people."

The PLWAs and Aids activists say government should act on care, support and treatment especially in the public sector.

Says Mahoro: "The little achievements registered are by the private sector and civil society. People down at the grassroots are dying even from treatable and manageable diseases including malaria and TB. The poor person in the community cannot afford to buy paracetamol [panadol] for headache if there is a cost attached. How then can we expect such people to buy anti retroviral drugs?"

Two days before Bush's visit to Uganda, the Ministry of Finance Under Secretary,

Mr. Orone Atibo announced that HIV positive public workers may soon receive free treatment. He said potential beneficiaries would have to test for HIV.

This announcement comes barely a month after the HIV/AIDS Coordinator in the Ministry of Education and Sports, Mr. Yusuf Nsubuga remarked that teachers with HIV/AIDS who stay away from work for six or more months will be retired.

"Employers should provide drugs for staff," Mwesigwa said.

The UNAIDS Executive Director, Dr. Peter Piot told an African Union summit held recently in Mozambique:

"...only about 50,000 Africans have access to AIDS medicine out of nearly 4 million people in immediate need of the medicine."

He said civic groups, PLWAs and governments must work together to fight the virus.

The ARVs are one way of fighting the virus.

Investment in scientific research is expensive and pharmaceutical companies would lose with a free universal ARV programme.

However, many people who cannot continuously afford the drugs develop resistance. This way the pharmaceutical also lose out!

Patent protection or universal provision of drugs, which one should President Bush decide for Africa?

The writer is an IPH/CDC Fellow