

Ten million Asians could be infected with HIV by 2020

About 10 million Asians are expected to be infected with HIV by 2020, an independent commission on AIDS in Asia warned Monday.

The commission comprising nine of Asia's leading development economists, scientists and policymakers working on AIDS, urged Asian countries to chart a new response to AIDS.

Their 236-page report on 'Redefining AIDS in Asia, crafting an effective response' was released by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh here Monday.

'Many Asian countries are lagging behind in their response to AIDS. At current levels of response, 10 million Asians are expected to be infected with HIV by 2020. By then, AIDS is also expected to claim an estimated 500,000 lives annually if governments do not change policies,' said the report sponsored by UNAIDS, Unicef and UNDP.

India accounts for roughly half the HIV-infected population of Asia. About 2.5 million Indians were estimated to be living with HIV in 2006.

Twenty-six countries have been covered by the report.

Almost five million Asians are currently infected with HIV, some 440,000 people got infected with HIV and 300,000 people died of AIDS-related diseases in 2007.

Regionally, AIDS is estimated to be the single largest cause of death and morbidity due to disease for adults aged 15-44 years.

'AIDS has emerged as the single-largest cause of disease-related deaths and work days lost among 15-44-year-old adults in Asia,' the report said.

The commission, set up in June 2006, was assigned an 18-month mandate to study and assess the impact of AIDS in Asia and recommend strategies for a stronger response to HIV and AIDS.

'These numbers indicate the seriousness of the problem we face,' said C. Rangarajan, chairman of the nine-member Commission and chairman of the Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister.

The report notes that India has managed to slow down the epidemic in some states like Tamil Nadu, which provides an effective and focused HIV response.

'Asian leaders in places such as Thailand, Hong Kong, Cambodia and Tamil Nadu in India has the foresight to recognise the threat of AIDS early on; they provided leadership that proves vital for reversing their epidemics,' it said.

Noting that Asia's response approach neither matched nor kept pace with the unfolding realities of the HIV epidemic, it recommends that policies must prioritise on focused and scaled-up interventions towards unprotected commercial sex, unprotected sex between men and the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes.

With an estimated 10 male clients for every sex worker in Asia, the commission notes that men who go for unprotected commercial sex are 'probably the single most important determinant of the size of HIV epidemics in most of Asia'.

By pragmatically focusing prevention programmes to the sex trade and on drug use, it suggests that governments would make considerable progress in halting and reversing the epidemic.

The experts found that existing resources are not only inadequate but are currently not being spent on priority interventions that produce an impact.

Rangarajan emphasized that 'countries which are at the early stages of the epidemic needed to spend an average of 50 cents per capita to reverse the epidemic.'

Every \$1 spent on early prevention would save \$8 in treatment costs later. Yet, the money spent on HIV programmes from national budgets decreased over the past decade in countries surveyed by the Commission, the only exceptions being India and China, the comprehensive report said.

The commission has estimated the resource need of the region to halt and reverse the epidemic at \$3.1 billion per annum. For a long-lasting and comprehensive response, however, the resource need would be \$6.4 billion a year.

Noting that stigma against HIV patients remains a major issue in Asia's health care systems, including in India, the commission has recommended a more meaningful role for civil society and community-based initiatives.

It emphasizes the need for strong political will across Asia. If leaders implement a largely scaled-up priority response right away they could save more than 200,000 lives each year and succeed in reversing the epidemic.

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