

Alliance formed in Assam to fight HIV/AIDS

At least 29 different civil society groups, including people living with HIV, have formed an alliance in Assam to jointly fight HIV/AIDS that has assumed epidemic proportions in the region.

'The need for a common platform of civil society groups, NGOs, media, trade unions, and people living with HIV, is to address various issues from removing stigma to accessing care and treatment, besides allowing people with HIV/AIDS to live a life with dignity,' Jahnabi Goswami, president of the Assam Network of Positive People (ANPP), told reporters here.

Goswami, 30, is one of the few women in India fighting to raise awareness about the disease and one of an even smaller number to have publicly declared in 1999 that she is HIV-positive.

The 'Assam People's Alliance to Combat HIV and AIDS' was formed a fortnight ago with several anti-AIDS campaigners, the church, women rights bodies and the government part of the conglomeration.

India accounts for about 5.7 million HIV-positive people, surpassing South Africa.

India's northeast has been declared as one of the country's high-risk zones with close to 100,000 people infected with HIV. There are some 1,780 HIV-positive people in Assam although unofficial estimates put the number at close to 30,000.

'The number of AIDS cases in Assam has swollen from 372 to 578 between October 2006 and February this year. This is an alarming rise,' S.I. Ahmed, head of the AIDS Prevention Society, one of the alliance partners, said.

The Alliance would help formulate strategies and policies for people living HIV/AIDS, besides launching an awareness drive as stigmatisation of the disease and the society's denial are major hindrances in controlling the epidemic.

'Stigma and discrimination are indeed problem areas in tackling HIV/AIDS. There is acceptance of the problem at the highest level, although lots need to be done to make it (the disease) acceptable in the society which is still in a denial mode,' Goswami said.

As part of the awareness drive, the Alliance is organising the Global AIDS Week of Action from May 20 to 26 in Assam beginning with the 24th International Candlelight Memorial march in the state in memory of those who died of AIDS.

'Several programmes were being organised from workshops to advocacy programmes, including a session with lawmakers from the state,' Ahmed said.

Only 19 percent of Asians who need AIDS drugs receive them, a World Health Organisation (WHO) report released last month said.

The WHO report is backed by the United Nations' anti-AIDS agency (UNAIDS) and UNICEF. India has only around 100,000 people on treatment.

'This is far short of the total need,' the report said.

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