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Leadership vital in war on AIDS

Each year, one day is set aside as a reminder to the world that millions of people are still dying from a disease that was discovered decades ago and for which there is no cure, no vaccine and which the richest countries, like Canada, have done far too little to combat.

That day is today, World AIDS Day 2007.

New figures released last week by UNAIDS, the United Nations agency charged with dealing with HIV/AIDS, illustrate the devastating toll of this dreadful disease, with an estimated 33.2 million people worldwide infected with HIV. This year alone, 2.5 million people became newly infected with HIV and 2.1 million died of AIDS. Almost two-thirds of the overall deaths have occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, leaving the region to cope with growing numbers of AIDS orphans.

But there is a glimmer of hope in the grim statistics. UNAIDS now says there are 7 million fewer people infected by HIV than it had previously estimated. And some scientists now believe the epidemic may have passed its peak.

While much has been done in recent years, agencies working to find a cure for HIV and AIDS and that deal with treating patients already stricken with the disease are constantly short of money and other resources. For example, women now make up 14 million, or 61 per cent, of HIV infections in Africa, yet a proposal for a new UN agency that would focus specifically on women and HIV/AIDS sits in limbo.

At the same time, more money is needed to develop a vaccine and microbicides, creams that prevent HIV transmission during sexual contact. Promising trials for both failed this year, a setback for development. More funds are also needed for drugs and a variety of education and prevention programs, including male circumcision, which recent studies have found greatly reduce the risk of getting AIDS.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's efforts on the AIDS front have been scattered at best. Although he cancelled a funding announcement at the World AIDS Conference in Toronto in August 2006, he did pledge \$120 million last December to the AIDS battle.

In February, he announced Canada would contribute up to \$111 million in new funds toward a Canadian HIV Vaccine Initiative, partly to set up a new facility to manufacture and test vaccines. The initiative is partly funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which contributed \$28 million. But published reports this week suggest some of Ottawa's money may have been taken from community AIDS prevention programs in Ontario, which have seen funding cut 30 per cent.

And earlier this week in Tanzania, Harper tried to gain widespread publicity by announcing his government would spend \$105 million over five years to help save children in Africa and Asia from tuberculosis, malaria and AIDS. What Harper failed to mention was that the government had previously announced the funding.

What should Harper do to help combat this disease?

First, he can speed passage of federal legislation that would allow makers of generic drugs to make cheap copies of expensive patent-protected medicines for AIDS-stricken countries. The legislation has been entwined in red tape for years, with the result that not a single generic drug has yet made it to Africa.

Second, he can boost Ottawa's spending on AIDS. Last September, Canada was urged to commit \$900 million over three years to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis. To date, 25 other countries have stepped up. Ottawa has said nothing.

Third, Harper also can focus more attention on AIDS in Canada, where more than 62,000 people are living with HIV/AIDS. New infections are often among young people, especially girls 15 to 19 years old.

Harper should take note of the theme for this year's AIDS Day, which is leadership. Twenty-five years after the AIDS epidemic first erupted, that leadership is still badly needed