

Children called "missing face" of AIDS pandemic

By Evelyn Leopold

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UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) - Some 2.3 million children under 15 years of age are living with HIV, with little access to treatment, according to a report by child advocacy groups.

"Children are the missing face of the AIDS pandemic," Ann Veneman, executive director of UNICEF, the UN Children's Fund, told a news conference on Friday in introducing a report by seven humanitarian groups.

Over 90 percent of the children with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, are in sub-Saharan Africa, where diagnosis is rare, treatment is expensive and most available drugs are produced for adults, the report said.

"If we cannot diagnose children, obviously we can't treat them," Veneman said.

A vast majority of the infants are infected by their mothers during pregnancy, where drugs are available to prevent transmission to infants but only about 10 percent receive them. The children rarely are given needed anti-retroviral drugs, the report said.

"Without treatment, most children with HIV will die before their fifth birthday," said Dean Hirsch, president of World Vision International, a Christian aid organization.

Charles MacCormack, president and CEO of Save the Children USA, said AIDS among adolescent females as well as the mother-to-child transmission were increasing, despite affordable treatments available over the past 15 years.

The new report and an earlier one by UNICEF showed that each year more than 650,000 children under 15 are infected with HIV for a current total of 2.3 million in 2005. Children under 15 account for 1 in 6 AIDS-related deaths. A child under 15 dies of an AIDS-related illness every minute, and a young person aged 15-24 contracts HIV every 15 seconds. All three officials emphasized a lack of research to combat AIDS in children, which means that treatment is less precise and more expensive. Development of new drugs are focused mainly on adults.

Although Africa governments have pledged to spend 15 percent of their budgets on public health, less than a third have done so, MacCormack said. He also said that pledges from the Group of Eight industrial nations have not fully materialized.

Veneman and Hirsch spoke out in favor of sex education, tailored to age groups, and the need to keep girls in school. In some African nations, one third of girls under 18 are the victims of forced sex, often during forced marriages.

"Church leaders try not to recognize the evil dimension of mankind when it comes to the abuse of girls," Hirsch said. "You need to talk about it."



The report on children was released ahead of a UN General Assembly Session on AIDS, from Wednesday to Friday, that will include foreign and health ministers and first lady Laura Bush leading the U.S. delegation.

More than 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS but declines in infection rates are being seen in some African countries, according to Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS. But he told Reuters money was still short and a long-term commitment would be needed for decades.

