

New HIV infections increasing among homosexuals

March 16 2010, By EDITH M. LEDERER , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- New HIV infections are increasing among homosexuals, drug users and prostitutes who don't seek help because of laws that criminalize these practices, the head of the U.N. AIDS agency said Monday.

Michel Sidibe, the head of UNAIDS, said "it is unacceptable" that 85 countries still have laws criminalizing same sex relations among adults, including seven that impose the death penalty for homosexual practices.

He called a proposed Ugandan law that would impose the death penalty for some gays "very unfortunate" and expressed hope it will never be approved.

At a time when UNAIDS is scaling up its program and seeking universal access to [HIV treatment](#), Sidibe said he was "very scared" because bad laws are being introduced by countries making it impossible for these at risk groups to have access to services.

"You have also a growing conservatism which is making me very scared," Sidibe added.

"We must insist that the rights of the minorities are upheld. If we don't do that ... I think the epidemic will grow again," he warned. "We cannot accept the tyranny of the majority."

Sidibe told a group of journalists at a luncheon hosted by the United

Nations Foundation that in countries from China to Kenya and Malawi, about 33 percent of new [HIV](#) infections are in men having sex with men, a significant increase.

By contrast, he said that in the Caribbean where most countries don't have repressive laws, only between 3 and 6 percent of HIV infections are in male homosexuals.

Even in the United States, where laws are not restrictive and the gay community was the first to tackle AIDS, Sidibe said it is "shocking" that more than 50 percent of new HIV infections last year occurred among homosexuals. And he said in the 19-25 age bracket the infection rate was even higher.

"It seems like we have come full circle" in the United States, he said. "After almost no cases a few years ago we are seeing again this new peak among people who are not having access to all the information, the protection that is needed."

In addition to failing to adequately deliver the right messages about AIDS prevention, Sidibe blamed complacency in a new generation that has access to treatment.

He added that this was not just a problem in the U.S. but in Europe and in Africa as well.

Sidibe said drug users are also getting the HIV virus that causes AIDS in high numbers.

"You have 70 percent of new infections occurring in Eastern Europe and Central Asia among drug users, but they are criminalized," he said. "They don't have access to services. They have to hide themselves and go underground."

Of the 16 million people in the world who are injecting drugs, almost 3 million are HIV positive, and among them less than 4 percent have access to treatment and less than 8 percent have access to services, Sidibe said.

"It's the same for men having sex with men," he said.

In Nigeria, where there are 1,000 new HIV infections every day, over 30 percent are in vulnerable groups - drug users, sex workers and homosexuals, he said.

Sidibe called for "a prevention revolution" including a campaign in major cities around the world like the anti-smoking campaigns launched in recent years.

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