

Don't 'Brexit' on AIDS, pleads Bill Clinton

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Bill Clinton pleaded with the world Friday not to abandon the campaign to rein in the HIV virus which still kills nearly a million people every year and infects twice as many.

The world must "hold the line" until a vaccine or cure is found, or face "calamitous" consequences, the US ex-president told the 22nd International AIDS Conference in Amsterdam

"There can be no Brexit in the fight against AIDS," said the founder of the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative, referring to Britain's decision to leave the European Union.

"Through a combination of complacency in some places and outright hostility to global multinational cooperative efforts in others, there is a serious risk that many people will say: 'Let's quit doing this'," Clinton told delegates.

"That would be calamitous."

He cited UN data showing that 1.8 million people were newly infected in 2017 with the immune system-wrecking virus that causes AIDS. The year saw 940,000 deaths.

Among 36.9 million people estimated to be living with HIV last year, 15.2 million had no access to life-saving virus-suppressing therapy (ART).

Don't 'walk away'

"Approximately 35 people will die while I'm up here talking," said Clinton.

Decades of research have yet to yield a cure or vaccine for HIV, which has infected almost 80 million people and killed 35.4 million since the early 1980s.

"I am pleading with you," Clinton told the final day of the conference which saw some 15,000 delegates—researchers, activists, and people living with HIV—rub shoulders with celebrity activists Charlize Theron, Elton John, Prince Harry, and Conchita.

"It is something you can't walk away from," the statesman insisted.

His own country came under fire in Amsterdam for policies researchers and activists say will put the global HIV fight at risk.

Anti-abortion conditions attached to US aid under the Donald Trump administration threatened programmes to halt the spread of the virus, they said.

Stipulations approved in Washington in May last year denies US aid to organisations which provide abortion information, referrals, or services—even with their own money.

This would cut off other services they provide as well, including HIV counselling, testing, and treatment.

Littered landscape

Commonly called the "global gag rule", the policy now "applies to almost all US global health bilateral assistance," said International AIDS Society president-elect Anton Pozniak.

"The reach of this policy has been greatly expanded, and has the potential to roll back progress on HIV."

Hundreds of recipient organisations risk losing their funding, according to research presented at the conference.

Clinics have already started laying off staff and some have had to close, community representatives said.

Activists called for the 2020 AIDS conference to be moved from San Francisco, citing the global gag rule and other policies they say are discriminatory.

"No AIDS conference in Trump's America," insisted a coalition calling itself "AIDS 2020 for All".

Speaker after speaker in Amsterdam warned there was a high risk of losing control of the epidemic, with infections rising in some 50 countries as anti-AIDS funding dwindled.

Eastern Europe and central Asia saw a 30-percent surge in new HIV cases since 2010, which researchers say is fuelled by repressive laws leaving intravenous drug users without access to clean needles or help.

At the same time, the gathering heard that the scientific quest for an AIDS cure remained far off.

No longer a death sentence, infection with the virus commits people to a lifetime on ART, if they can access it.

For Clinton, the most important message is to not give up on research, funding, and rolling out prevention and treatment.

Walking away from the fight now threatens "a return to epidemic proportions with breathtakingly negative consequences," he insisted.

"It could derail any number of other health, economic, and social objectives in nation after nation after nation, and leave a littered landscape."

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