

Southern African Aids and hunger 'costing a life a minute'

By Basildon Peta

Southern Africa's "ugly sisters", HIV/Aids and hunger, now claim a victim every minute, according to the United Nations Children's Fund.

Unicef said in a statement yesterday that the deadly combination of HIV/Aids and hunger continued to devastate lives across Southern Africa, with the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance rising to 15.1 million across Zambia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland and Lesotho.

The HIV pandemic is now claiming a life every minute in the SADC region.

Unicef said recent figures from southern Africa showed that one in six Aids-related deaths in the world in 2001 occurred in Southern Africa, and four million children have been orphaned in the SADC region alone.

"Life-saving humanitarian interventions, including large-scale food aid, health, nutrition and agricultural outputs in the region have helped to avert mass starvation since July 2002, but danger has not been eliminated, and the region remains in the grips of an insidious disaster requiring an exceptional response from the international community," said Unicef's London office.

Its statement was issued ahead of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's address in New York today to G8 ministers on the link between food security, HIV/Aids and governance.

Unicef said to compound the current crisis, a wave of secondary casualties was appearing as young adults died from Aids, leaving behind orphans and the elderly who are at high risk of hunger and illness.

Unicef UK's executive director David Bull, who visited the SADC region in 2002, said: "HIV/Aids and hunger are so inseparable they've been referred to as the 'ugly sisters' in southern Africa. Aids stabs at the very heart of families, and cripples agricultural production.

"An HIV-affected family can see its income drop by up to 80% and its food intake by 15% to 30%. As people become absolutely desperate for food, they are more likely to turn to measures like prostitution, which of course has an immediate impact on HIV rates."

He said children were the most affected by this deadly combination.

"Unicef is working to make sure these children get the support they desperately need. We are approaching everything through the lens of HIV/Aids and its impact on women and children," said Bull.

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