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Staggering AIDS statistics

HALF of the HIV cases being treated in Malta involve African immigrants, who make up just one per cent of the population, the island's main newspaper revealed recently.

New HIV-positive cases in the EU's smallest state have quadrupled — from between seven and 10 cases a year to about 30 to 40 — in the past two to three years, coinciding with increases in the number of illegal immigrant landings, *The Sunday Times* reported. The statistics are expected to continue fuelling the anti-immigration sentiment sweeping Malta.

Christopher Barbara, chairman of the Pathology Department at Malta's state hospital, expressed concern about a problem which he insists cannot be ignored.

Currently, there are 100 people being treated for HIV in hospital, and half of these are immigrants — cases that have shot up in the past couple of years.

Barbara pointed out that illegal immigrants were coming from high-risk populations and people should be knowledgeable about the dangers of having unprotected sex.

Sub-Saharan Africa is more heavily affected by HIV and AIDS than any other region in the

world, according to the UNAIDS 2008 report. An estimated 22 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2007 and approximately 1.9 million additional people were infected during that year. People from the Horn of Africa make up the bulk of Malta's asylum seekers.

Although no blood tests are being taken to establish whether immigrants entering the island were infected with HIV, Barbara said this was not a practical or ethical solution to the problem.

"We cannot have a situation

where somebody reaches the island and we'll just push in a needle, take blood and test them.

Even if we get all the money in the world to finance their medication, we still need specialists in infectious diseases to administer the antiviral drugs. We only have two such people in Malta," Barbara said.

Health Parliamentary Secretary Joe Cassar said the government was taking advice from consultants on how best to tackle the problem.

The story was released on the eve of a campaign steered by the group Campaign for National Independence, which is to collect signatures for a petition against illegal immigration.

During a visit to Malta recently, French Foreign Affairs Minister Bernard Kouchner insisted that Europe needs to share the "enormous burden" of illegal immigrants that Malta is facing.

While the influx of boat people from Africa normally rages on during the warmer months, Malta has received hundreds since December. Several local groups have called on the Maltese government to abandon its international obligations in an attempt get Europe and Libya to act. — dpa



"We cannot have a situation where somebody reaches the island and we'll just push in a needle, take blood and test them," said the chairman of the Pathology Department at Malta's state hospital — Gettytic



French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner