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# South Africa to treat all HIV-positive babies

**PRETORIA:** South Africa announced ambitious new plans yesterday for earlier and expanded treatment for HIV-positive babies and pregnant women, a change that could save hundreds of thousands of lives in the nation hardest hit by the virus that causes AIDS.

President Jacob Zuma — once ridiculed for saying a shower could prevent AIDS — was cheered as he outlined the measures on World AIDS Day. The new policy marks a dramatic shift from former President Thabo Mbeki, whose health minister distrusted drugs developed to keep AIDS patients alive and instead promoted garlic and beet treatments. Those policies led to more than 300,000 premature deaths, a Harvard study concluded.

The changes are in line with new guidelines issued a day earlier by the World Health Organisation that call for HIV-infected pregnant women to be given drugs earlier and while breastfeeding. By treating all HIV-infected babies, survival rates should also improve for the youngest citizens in South Africa, one of only 12 countries

where child mortality has worsened since 1990, in part due to AIDS.

Zuma compared the fight against HIV, which infects one in 10 South Africans, to the decades-long struggle his party led against the apartheid government, which ended in 1994 with the election of Nelson Mandela in the country's first multiracial vote.

"At another moment in our history, in another context, the liberation movement observed that the time comes in the life of any nation when there remain only two choices: submit or fight," Zuma said. "That time has now come in our struggle to overcome AIDS. Let us declare now, as we declared then, that we shall not submit."

In some ways, Zuma is an unlikely AIDS hero. As his Zulu tradition allows, he has three wives — experts say having multiple, concurrent partners heightens the risk of AIDS. And in 2006, while being tried on charges of raping an HIV-positive family friend, he testified he took a shower after extramarital sex to lower the risk of AIDS. He was acquitted of rape.

— AP



**HELP IS ON ITS WAY:** Zuma's new policy will help children such as these two girls at Nkosi's Haven, a shelter and care for destitute HIV-infected mothers and their children in Johannesburg — AFPpic