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Britain's RM4.9 million condom gift to South Africa

LONDON: Britain announced yesterday one million pounds in aid to South Africa for the purchase of condoms to tackle HIV and AIDS in the world's worst-affected country ahead of the 2010 World Cup.

The money, equivalent to €1.1 million or US\$1.5 million (RM4.9 million), is to bolster the host's condom supplies, a move health officials predict will be necessary amid the tournament's "spirit of festivity."

Britain said the aid, announced shortly after a visit to London by South African President Jacob Zuma, would help the country's aim to buy one billion condoms at a time the AIDS fight has been hit by the economic downturn.

"As a consequence, we face the very real prospect that progress on tackling HIV will go into reverse," said international development minister Gareth Thomas.

"That is why (Britain) is supporting

South Africa's leadership and drive to turn the tide on their epidemic."

An estimated 5.7 million of South Africa's 48 million people have HIV, including 280,000 children, according to the UN AIDS agency.

A top medical officer unveiled plans last month to increase condom supplies ahead of the football tournament, due to start in less than 100 days.

"There's going to be a large number of people who will be descending onto

the country," said Victor Ramathesele, general medical officer for South Africa's 2010 organising committee.

"There's going to be a spirit of festivity and... there could be a more than usual demand for measures, such as condoms," he said.

Zuma left Britain Friday after a three-day State visit, which was marred by a row over British media coverage of his polygamy and a failure to agree on Zimbabwe. — AFP