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Watershed in AIDS story

New developments enable better control over HIV infection

A GLOBAL medical forum on AIDS got down to business yesterday for four days of debate on powerful new weapons to combat a pandemic that in 30 years has claimed as many lives as a World War.

Held every two years, the meeting is taking place in Rome amid a flurry of startlingly good news from scientific trials, prompting some veterans to talk of a watershed in the AIDS story.

"This conference could well be a turnaround," Elly Katabira, president of the International AIDS Society (IAS), told a press conference.

"The results presented this week could prove today as important as the antiretrovirals breakthroughs of the

mid-nineties."

Huge excitement has been stirred by proof that the famous drug "cocktail" used to treat people with the human immunodeficiency virus can also be used to prevent HIV infection in others.

The conference will hear the latest data from a trial conducted among "serodiscordant" heterosexual couples in Africa, meaning couples in which one partner had been tested positive with HIV while the other was uninfected.

The risk of HIV infection fell by 96 per cent when the infected partner started early use of daily antiretrovirals.

This highlights a stunning way of stopping the relentless rise in new HIV infec-

tions, simply by treating those who already have the virus, say some experts.

Already some 30 million people have been killed by AIDS since the disease first came to light in June 1981. In 2009, more than 33 million people were living with HIV and 2.6 million people became newly infected, according to UNAIDS.

In his keynote speech, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibe talked of "a game-changing moment for all of us, the first time we can talk of control of HIV."

But he also spoke of the practical tasks ahead, especially mustering the funds to turn "treatment as prevention" from a bright new theory into action on the ground.

Today, some 6.6 million

people in poor countries have grasped the drug lifeline, a massive increase compared with a decade earlier, but another nine million are still in need of treatment.

AIDS spending today is around US\$16 billion (RM48b) annually, compared with current needs estimated at US\$24 billion, according to UNAIDS.

The conference gathers 5,500 specialists, ranging from virologists to pharmacologists and disease trackers.

Other trials to be discussed in Rome will look at the effectiveness of giving uninfected people HIV drugs — an approach called "pre-exposure prophylaxis," or PrEP, that can reduce sexual transmission by up to 73 per cent. — AFP