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South Africa gets RM406m from US

PRETORIA: The United States is giving South Africa US\$120 million (RM406.8 million) for AIDS treatment drugs in response to a plea from President Jacob Zuma that underlines his new approach to fighting the epidemic in the country with the world's heaviest AIDS burden.

His predecessor's health minister distrusted drugs developed to keep AIDS patients alive, instead promoting beets and garlic treatments.

Zuma, who took over in April, has said former president Thabo Mbeki's AIDS policies were wrong.

Zuma's government has set a target of getting 80 per cent of those who need AIDS drugs on them by 2011.

"This additional funding is in direct response to the government of South Africa's request," US Ambassador Donald Gips said in conjunction with World AIDS Day yesterday.

"We are pleased and honoured to respond to President Zuma as South Africa's partner in this fight."

Michel Sidibe, head of the United Nations' AIDS programmes, travelled to South Africa for World AIDS Day in part to show support for this new direction, saying in an interview that Zuma was "committed to making change happen".

While Zuma's intentions have been lauded by AIDS activists, reports of shortages of the treatment drugs at some South African clinics have raised questions on whether the government has the money and capacity for a massive rollout. — AP