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AIDS proves a costly time-bomb for govts

LONDON: The International HIV/AIDS Alliance warned on Saturday that the annual cost of tackling the HIV epidemic could balloon to US\$35 billion (RM112 billion) by 2030 if governments fail to invest in efficient, targeted and cost-effective prevention measures.

On the eve of an international conference on AIDS in Vienna, the Alliance said the AIDS virus, which already infects around 33.4 million people across the world, was a "costly time-bomb" for families, governments and donors.

"For every two people who get treatment, five others get infected. At this rate, spending for HIV will rise from US\$13 billion now to between US\$19 and US\$35 billion in just 20 years", Alvaro Bermejo, executive director of the Alliance, said in a statement.

Bermejo said authorities run-

ning national AIDS programmes around the world needed to increase HIV prevention by tackling the barriers that stop marginalised groups — such as drugs users, prostitutes and gay men in some countries — from getting HIV treatment and services.

If they targeted resources at those most affected they could "cut more new infections and still have savings to put into scaling up treatment", he said.

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) that causes AIDS is transmitted during sex, in blood and on needles and in breast milk.

It gradually wears down the immune system and can take years to cause symptoms, and has killed 25 million people since the pandemic began in the early 1980s.

The Alliance said its workers

had seen how drug users in Ukraine were harassed when trying to get drug substitution therapy, and how doctors prescribing substitutes for them were jailed.

Ukraine has one of the world's fastest growing HIV epidemics, mostly due to infection among drug users.

In Africa — the region accounting for 67 per cent of all people living with HIV — its staff were seeing an increasing trend to criminalise homosexual men.

Treating those with HIV with cocktails of AIDS drugs can also help to stop more people from getting infected, but AIDS treatment programmes in developing countries are struggling to get the funding they need as wealthy donor nations cut budgets to reduce deficits following the global recession. — Reuters