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Swaziland to cut HIV with mass circumcision drive

MATSHAPA (Swaziland): "Just relax, it won't be very painful," are the last words Maqhawe Tsela hears before the nurse plunges a large needle into his penis.

As the anaesthetic took effect and the doctor readied his scalpel, 33-year-old Tsela would join the ranks of a new generation of circumcised men in Swaziland, where the government had launched a drive to combat the world's highest HIV infection rate.

Studies had suggested that circumcision could halve men's chances of contracting HIV. Circumcision programmes were under way in several African countries, including Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

But Swaziland's US\$15 million (RM45.8 million) drive to circumcise 160,000 men and teenagers within a year was the first nationwide campaign in the country.

Time is of the essence: one in four adults is HIV positive and two per cent of the country's 1.2 million people die every year of AIDS.

Circumcision can be a tough sell in this deeply Christian society, where it is not traditionally practised.

In a shantytown known as White City outside a commercial centre here, a team of circumcision recruiters comb the streets, persuading Swazi men to volunteer for surgery.

"What am I going to do when God asks me 'Where is your foreskin?'" demands one

man.

"Why do you cut your hair? God could ask you that, too," said team member Mzwandile Shongwe. — AFP



A man waits to be circumcised as part of a massive circumcision campaign by the Swaziland government to reduce its high rate of HIV infection. — AFP picture