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Philippines struggles with AIDS

RISING INFECTION: Govt must prioritise its funding to reach those most at risk

MANILA

THE country is struggling to deal with a worsening HIV/AIDS problem, with far too little money being spent on reversing a steady rise in infection rates, health experts warn.

The government will have to prioritise its funding to concentrate on helping the most at-risk communities as it faces a budget shortfall of up to US\$370 million (RM1.15 billion) over the next five years, health department assistant secretary Eric Tayag said.

“If we only have so much, we have to prioritise the scope of our programmes, choosing the target populations, choosing the specific areas,” Tayag said.

“It is a race against time because the more cases there are, the more different kinds of financial support are needed in the long run.”

The number of HIV/AIDS cases detected in the Philippines — which has a population of 94 million — is still relatively small with only 7,884 cases recorded since 1984.

But the Philippines is one of only seven countries listed by UNAIDS (the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS) to have suffered rising infection rates last year.

And more than 1,800 cases have already been reported in the first 10 months of this year, exceeding

the 1,591 cases reported for all of last year, according to government data.

Tayag said the government estimated it needed 35 billion pesos (RM2.5 billion) for HIV-prevention programmes from this year to 2016.

However, the health department had only identified foreign and local sources for 19 billion pesos, leaving a projected shortfall of 16 billion pesos.

The funding crunch is expected to hit hardest when the current “round” of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria runs out in November

next year, said Maria Teresa Bagasao, country director of UN-AIDS.

Another “round” of aid pledges was originally scheduled for next year, but has been put back to 2013 and any grant money will not be released until 2014 at the earliest, she said.

“The country needs to look at whether there is going to be a critical gap in the funding. It has to sit down and identify where the gap will be. In prevention or treatment?”

The Global Fund, a UN-supported partnership of governments and private aid groups, had made up the bulk of the foreign aid that paid for as much as 80 per cent of the country’s HIV prevention and treatment programmes, Bagasao said.

Activists have accused the government of cutting its own funding for HIV programmes and relying too much on external sources.

“There was a gradual decrease (in local funding) because of an over-

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reliance on external financing like the Global Fund," said Jonas Bagas, spokesman for the Network to Stop AIDS in the Philippines, a coalition of health and activist groups.

Amid the budget concerns, Tayag said the Philippines might have to focus its spending mainly on the homosexual and injecting drug user communities, because they were the groups in which infections were rising significantly.

AFP

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needs to look

at whether there is going to be a critical gap in the funding. It has to... identify where the gap will be. In prevention or treatment?"

Maria Teresa Bagasao,
UNAIDS
country director



A **World AIDS Day** poster displayed in front of the World Health Organisation regional office in Manila. There's a **race against time** in the Philippines — the more HIV/AIDS cases there are, the more different kinds of **financial support** are needed in the long run. AFP pic