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Turning the tide.

NEW STRAITS TIMES: More successes than failures in the fight against AIDS

VISIONARIES among the global panoply fighting HIV/AIDS are no longer scoffed at when they say the pandemic can be defeated. Indeed, light has been shining with increasing intensity at the end of the three-decade-long tunnel. Some experts foresee an outright cure; others are sure the immuno-deficiency virus can be completely contained even with existing technologies. HIV/AIDS has been commuted from a "death sentence" to a "chronic disease", according to Pedro Chequer, coordinator for the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) in Brazil. At the centre of the fight, the figures are certainly deserving of praise: a record eight million now have access to anti-retroviral drugs; and the costs of this treatment have gone down from US\$10,000 per patient in 2000 to just US\$100 (RM320) last year. There may never be a fit and proper occasion to bring out the champagne, but the many-thousand-strong fraternity meeting in Washington this week for the biennial International AIDS Conference will have much to warm their hearts.

Still, the news is not uniformly good. The spread and severity of HIV/AIDS since it was detected in the 1980s have cleaved rather cleanly between the world's haves and have-nots. When it hit Africa hard a decade ago, it threatened to cripple entire generations. As with health-care in general, the poor are last in line. The biggest worry at the conference is a funding shortfall because of recession and the 2008 financial crisis, which could cause an untold number of avoidable deaths. Although down slightly, 1.7 million succumbed to the ravages of AIDS last year. Many developing countries have

stepped up spending, contributing to an 11 per cent increase in total investments to US\$16.8 billion last year. But this was well below the US\$22 to US\$24 billion needed by 2015, according to UNAIDS. Infection rates, while declining in most places, are rising in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

It is not just money that stands in the way of the hopeful prediction. Culture and what Chequer calls "conservatism" also impede a comprehensive antidote to the contagion. Too many people, in both developed and developing countries, remain blithely or otherwise unconcerned about risky behaviours. Communities not honest enough with themselves could fall prey as the disease migrates from its traditional targets. Those aged 15 to 24 account for 40 per cent of new infections, for example, with women twice as many as men. HIV/AIDS is no longer a shortcut to the hereafter, but more battling is to be done still to bolster UNAIDS executive director Michel Sidibe's belief in a "new era for treatment, new era for prevention".

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