

Headline	Pitiful condition of HIV sufferers		
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## \* Pitiful condition of HIV sufferers

**YANGON:** Their Aung has been trained not to show weakness, but he's convinced no soldier is strong enough for this.

He clenches his jaw and pauses, trying to will his chin to stop quivering and his eyes not to blink.

But he's like a crumbling mountain. His shoulders shake, then collapse inwards, and he suddenly seems small in the denim Wrangler shirt that's rolled up to his elbows.

Big tears drip from his reddened eyes, and he looks away, ashamed. As he sits outside a crowded clinic on the outskirts of the capital, he knows his body is struggling to fight the Human Immuno-deficiency Virus (HIV), tuberculosis and diabetes — but he can't help wishing he was sicker.

Although Aung is ill enough to qualify for HIV treatment in other poor countries, there's simply not enough pills to go around in Myanmar. Only the sickest of the sick are lucky enough to go home with a supply of lifesaving medicine here.

The others soon learn their fate is ultimately decided by the number of CD4 cells in the blood samples they give every three months.

The World Health Organisation recommends treatment to start when CD4 count drops to 350. In Myanmar, it must fall below 150.

Antiretroviral therapy, in the past considered a miracle only available

to HIV patients in the West, is no longer scarce.

But Myanmar remains a special case. Kept in the dark for so many decades, this country of 60 million

did not reap the same international aid as other needy nations.

Experts warn it will take years to prop up a broken system.

"Burma is like the work that I did in Africa in the 1990s. It's 15, 20 years out of date," says Dr Chris Beyrer, an HIV expert at Johns Hopkins University, who has worked in Myanmar for years.

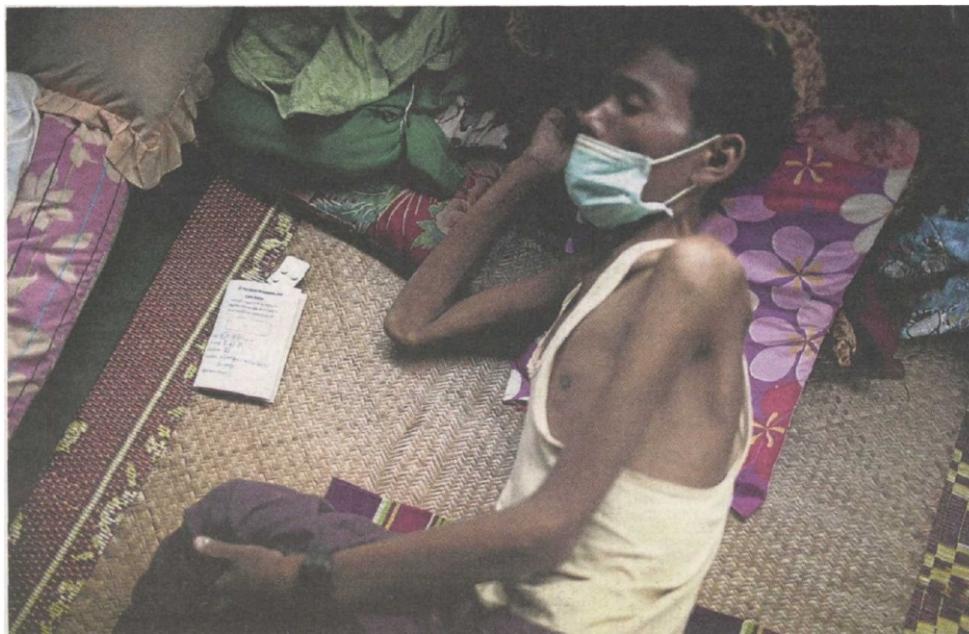
Of the estimated 240,000 people living with HIV, half are going without treatment. And some 18,000 people die from the disease every year, according to UNAIDS.

The problem worsened last year after the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria cancelled a round of funding due to a lack of international donations.

But as Myanmar wows the world with its reforms, the US and other nations are easing sanctions.

The Global Fund recently urged Myanmar to apply for assistance that would open the door for HIV drugs to reach more than 75 per cent of those in need by the end of 2015.

It would also fight tuberculosis, a major killer of HIV patients. **AP**



An HIV patient, who is also infected with tuberculosis, resting on a bed near his pills at a hospice in Yangon. Myanmar ranks among the world's hardest places to get HIV care. AP pic