

Headline	Mum-to-child HIV spread stamped out		
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Orphaned HIV-positive children waiting at the Human Development Foundation in the Klong Toey slum in Bangkok. AP pic

Mum-to-child HIV spread stamped out

MILESTONE:

Thailand becomes first Asian nation to ensure AIDS-free generation

BANGKOK

THAILAND has become the first Asian country to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said yesterday, a milestone in the fight against the disease.

The announcement was a boost for a generation of Thai health workers, who transformed the nation from one of Asia's most HIV-ravaged

societies to a pin-up for how to effectively tackle the crisis.

Describing the elimination as a "remarkable achievement", WHO said Thailand was "the first (country) with a large HIV epidemic to ensure an AIDS-free generation".

Belarus and Armenia were also declared free of mother-to-baby HIV transmissions yesterday, but both nations had a much lower prevalence of the virus.

Previously, Cuba was the only other country to have eliminated mother-to-child transmission under WHO's criteria in July last year.

The health body said Thailand's routine screening and universal free medication for pregnant women with HIV was crucial in stopping the virus from being passed on.

If left untreated, mothers with HIV have a 15 to 45 per cent chance of transmitting the virus to their

children during pregnancy, child-birth or while breastfeeding. Taking antiretroviral drugs during pregnancy significantly reduces those chances to just over one per cent.

In 2000, Thailand became one of the first countries in the world to provide free antiretroviral medication to all pregnant women diagnosed with HIV.

Screening for the virus during pregnancy was also routine, even in the country's most remote areas, WHO said.

According to government figures, the number of babies born with HIV has dropped from 1,000 in 2000 to just 85 last year, a large enough fall for WHO to declare mother-to-child transmission over.

A small number of cases were taken into account, as treatment with medicine was not 100 per cent effective. **AFP**