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World AIDS forum to hear progress on drugs, money worries

VIENNA: A world forum on AIDS was to open here yesterday with major announcements expected over six days on the use of lifesaving drugs to combat HIV and the quest for a virus-thwarting microbicide gel.

More than 20,000 scientists, policymakers, grassroots campaigners and activists have registered for the 18th International AIDS Conference.

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) has claimed more than 25 million lives since the disease first came to light in 1981.

At least 33 million people are living with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), a microbe that causes AIDS by destroying the immune system and exposing the body to opportunistic disease. The tally of new infections is rising by around 2.7 million a year.

The global confab in Vienna will catapult anti-HIV drugs, known as antiretrovirals, to a new level of importance.

Around five million people around the world are alive today thanks to this therapy, which emerged in 1996 and initially was so expensive that it was restricted to rich nations.

Experts are set to unveil new recommendations for when the drug "cocktail" should be prescribed, in the light of mounting evidence that

earlier initiation of treatment saves lives and diminishes sickness in the long run.

Another big announcement is on Tuesday, when researchers unveil the results from a South African trial where women tested a prototype gel laced with an antiretroviral.

The search for a vaginal microbicide has been one of the most daunting challenges in the history of AIDS.

The goal is to provide women, especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, where two-thirds of the world's HIV infections occur, with a means other than the condom to protect themselves against the pathogen.

The main events in the conference are seminars, speeches and workshops for updating knowledge and swapping experiences about the many aspects of the world's HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Among the issues, the situation in Eastern Europe and Central Europe will loom large, as will the question of human rights.- AFP

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COMPETITORS attend the 18th Life Ball in Vienna yesterday. Life Ball is Europe's largest annual AIDS charity and the organisers hoped to help people living with HIV-AIDS. PHOTO: AFP