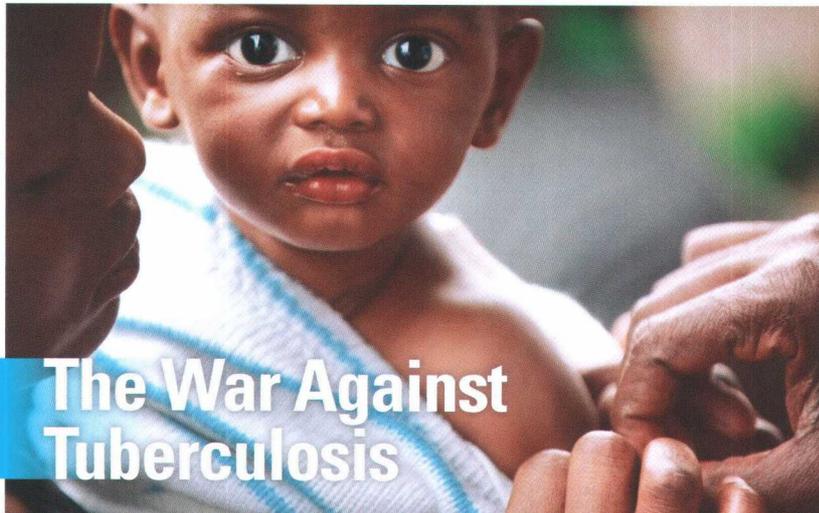


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A trio of Southern African health ministers on the 29th of March said the world's efforts to wrestle down tuberculosis were quickly being outstripped by the disease itself as it mutates into ever deadlier forms.

Mphu Ramatlapeng, minister of health in the tiny kingdom of Lesotho noted that "everyone has been absolutely lax" about the fight against the killer disease, an attitude that has helped to allow it to develop into ever more virulent forms of multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) and even extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis (XDR-TB).

The United Nations warned last week that as many as 8 million people would die of tuberculosis worldwide in the coming four years without follow-through on a successful global health strategy to fight the disease.

Ramatlapeng joined her colleagues from South Africa and Swaziland - Aaron Motsoaledi and Benedict Xaba - for the annual board meeting of the Stop TB Partnership, held this year in Washington. The

Tuberculosis is a highly contagious infection which affects the lungs causing breathing difficulty and other respiratory problems. Commonly found in crowded and unsanitary living conditions, the disease, according to the World Health Organisation, affects 9 million people a year.

programme, which is attached to the World Health Organization, aims to push tuberculosis up the world's political agenda.

Their efforts have been energized by the debut earlier this year of one of the first new anti-TB technologies to emerge in decades - the GeneXpert TB machine, which can diagnose sputum for TB and its drug resistance within 90 minutes. It is a huge improvement in making a diagnosis that used to take weeks or even months to make.

Earlier this month, US Secretary Hillary Clinton warned the House of Representatives that a proposed US\$1b cut in contributions to global health would deny TB treatment to 40,000 children and family members of adults suffering from tuberculosis.

The proposed US cuts would also deny treatment to 400,000 people for HIV/AIDS under the US-funded PEPFAR (President's Emergency

Plan For AIDS Relief) programme, Clinton said. HIV/AIDS treatment is essential in combatting tuberculosis, which has increased by leaps and bounds among HIV sufferers as their immune systems are compromised.

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