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Major AIDS forum gets down to work

ROME: A global medical forum on AIDS got down to business on Sunday for four days of debate on powerful new weapons to combat a pandemic that in 30 years has claimed as many lives as a World War.

Held every two years, the meeting is taking place in Rome amid a flurry of startlingly good news from scientific trials, prompting some veterans to talk of a watershed in the AIDS story.

"This conference could well be a turnaround," Elly Katabira, president of the International AIDS Society (IAS), told a press conference. "The results presented this week could prove today as important as the antiretrovirals breakthroughs of the mid-nineties."

Huge excitement has been stirred by proof that the famous drug "cocktail" used to treat people with the human immunodeficiency virus can also be used to prevent HIV infection in others.

The conference will hear the latest data from a trial conducted among "sero-discordant" heterosexual couples in Africa, meaning couples in which one partner had

been tested positive HIV while the other was uninfected.

The risk of HIV infection fell by 96 percent when the infected partner started early use of daily antiretrovirals.

This highlights a stunning way of stopping the relentless rise in new HIV infections, simply by treating those who already have the virus, say some experts.

Already some 30 million people have been killed by AIDS since the disease first came to light in June 1981. In 2009, more than 33 million people were living with HIV and 2.6 million people became newly infected, according to UNAIDS.

In his keynote speech, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibe talked of "a game-changing moment for all of us... the first time we can talk of control of HIV."

But he also spoke of the practical tasks ahead, especially mustering the funds to turn "treatment as prevention" from a bright new theory into action on the ground.

Today, some 6.6 million people in poor countries have grasped the drug lifeline, a massive increase

compared with a decade earlier, but another nine million are still in need of treatment.

"There is an extraordinary window of opportunity and the sooner we act on it and the more robustly we act on it the quicker we'll achieve the goal of turning around the epidemic," Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), told AFP. "Pure, simple math tells you that the fewer people who are infected, the fewer the people who are going to get infected."

AIDS spending today is around US\$16 billion annually, compared with current needs estimated at \$24 billion, according to UNAIDS.

But Jean-Paul Moatti, an economics professor at France's University of the Mediterranean in Marseille, southern France, argued treatment as prevention "could pay for itself in about a decade." "Countries would have lower health costs and better productivity because fewer people fall sick."

The conference gathers 5,500 specialists, ranging from virologists to pharmacologists and disease trackers.- AFP

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DEMONSTRATORS hold a banner against Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi during the 6th IAS Conference on HIV pathogenesis, treatment and prevention in Rome's Parco della Musica Auditorim. PHOTO: AFP