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Commonwealth urged to tackle homophobic laws

PERTH (Australia): Commonwealth countries will be urged to repeal homophobic laws at a leaders' summit this week in a bid to stamp out the deadly spread of HIV, the virus which causes AIDS.

The body tasked with developing options to reform the Commonwealth has noted that the old British Empire laws against gays are still in force in 41 of the 54 member nations.

These include statutes, mostly enacted in colonial times, which criminalise homosexual sex.

"It's just a dear little legacy of the British Empire," Michael Kirby, a retired High Court judge and Australia's representative on the Eminent Persons Group, said ahead of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM).

"It's a very special British problem.

"And the problem is it makes it very difficult to get messages about HIV out," he said in comments broadcast on the ABC.

About 2.7 million new people become infected with HIV every year, with the virus claiming a further two million lives annually from AIDS.

But Commonwealth countries are disproportionately burdened with the disease, accounting for some 30 percent of the global population but 60 percent of the world's HIV/AIDS cases.-AFP