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Brazilian city lights up in red for World Aids Day

RIO DE JANEIRO: Brazil's second city lit 10 of its monuments in red Thursday to celebrate World AIDS Day, including its iconic statue of Christ the Redeemer.

"It's a way to remind the population that AIDS has yet to be cured and that condoms are the only way, technically speaking, to fight the AIDS virus and other sexually transmitted diseases," said Carlos Tufvesson, Rio de Janeiro's sexual diversity coordinator.

On Saturday, Rio will offer tests to the public to detect the HIV and syphilis viruses at 185 health centers in the city. Results will be provided within 10 days.

Rio's government has invested two million reais (\$1.1 million) in the program, the largest city-wide campaign in Brazil seeking to combat ignorance, prejudices and misinformation about AIDS.

An estimated 250,000 Brazilians live with the HIV virus that causes AIDS without knowing it. But Brazil has successfully stabilized the pandemic within its borders, recording a 0.61 percent drop in new cases from 2009 to 2010 according to Health Ministry figures.

Authorities still remain concerned about the rise in the number of cases in homosexual males aged 15 to 24 - from 25.2 percent in 1990 to 46.4 percent in 2010 - especially among transvestites.

The red lights will be on for three nights in Rio. A number of other countries are also participating in the campaign, including Argentina, Australia, Britain, Canada, China, South Africa and the United States.

In downtown Buenos Aires, a giant red banner was rolled down the side of the city's iconic obelisk, while a group of activists

handed out condoms to passers-by. The Casa Rosada government palace was decorated with a big red bow.

Some 130,000 people live with HIV in Argentina, and two thirds of them do not know they carry the virus, according to activist groups.

In Central America, hundreds rallied for an end to the discrimination and stigma against those affected by HIV/AIDS.

"The goal is zero cases, zero deaths in 2012," Honduran Youth Network Against AIDS volunteer Mario Erazo told AFP during a march in Tegucigalpa.

According to Erazo there are 30,000 Hondurans living with HIV and 21,000 patients who have developed full-blown AIDS, but only 8,000 victims receive antiretroviral treatment.

"Thousands have the virus but have not taken the test because they are afraid to get tested, and the virus gets transmitted from person to person," Erazo said. -AFP



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PEOPLE stand around an AIDS ribbon formed from candles to commemorate World AIDS day in Guatemala City. PHOTO: REUTERS