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US hosts AIDS conference amid calls for action

WASHINGTON: The world's largest meeting on HIV/AIDS opens yesterday in the US capital with calls to speed up the global response to the three-decade-long epidemic that killed 1.5 million people last year.

The 19th International AIDS Conference is expected to draw 25,000 people, including politicians, scientists and activists, as well as some of the estimated 34 million people living with HIV who will tell their stories.

Among them is the only man who has achieved a functional cure of HIV through a bone marrow transplant, American Timothy Brown, who is scheduled to appeal for a fresh push toward a cure during the six-day conference that runs through July 27.

Other high-profile appearances include Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, former president Bill Clinton, former first lady Laura Bush, singer Elton John, philanthropist Bill Gates and actress Whoopi Goldberg.

President Barack Obama has faced some criticism for his decision not to attend in person. He is sending a video message and will invite some attendees to the White House for talks on Thursday, a top health official said.

Held every two years, the conference — whose theme this year is 'Turning the Tide' — is returning to the United States for the first time since 1990, after being kept away by laws that barred people with HIV from traveling to the country.

The US ban was formally lifted in 2009, and researchers have described fresh optimism in the fight against AIDS on several fronts. — AFP