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Myanmar shelter offers refuge for HIV patients

YANGON: At a small and peaceful clinic on the outskirts of Yangon, 20 volunteers tend to 300 HIV patients abandoned by a health care system allowed to crumble during decades of brutal military rule in Myanmar.

In a country whose rulers long prioritised military spending over the needs of their people, these men, women and children have found a refuge thanks to the work of a member of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party.

The centre was set up in 2005 by Phyu Phyu Thin, now a parliamentarian with the National League for Democracy, the country's main opposition force following landmark by-elections last year.

Two traditional wooden houses surround a courtyard which is home to both a kitchen and washing area due to lack of space.

Patients in advanced stages of the illness rest on wooden benches during the blistering heat, too weak to venture far during the day. Those who have the strength leave each morning to earn an income for their families.

In three rooms, including one reserved for women, each patient has a few square metres in which to keep personal belongings such as photos and souvenirs.

Three meals a day are served up by volunteers, some of whom are themselves infected with the virus.

At a morning medical session,



THIS filed picture taken on February 15, 2013 shows an HIV patient lying on a mat as she is administered medicine through an intravenous infusion at a clinic in the outskirts of Yangon. At a clinic in the outskirts of Myanmar's biggest city Yangon, 20 volunteers tend to 300 HIV patients abandoned by a healthcare system allowed to crumble during decades of brutal military rule. PHOTO: AFP

patients receive intravenous infusions as part of treatment that includes pain relief drugs, antiretroviral therapy and medicine for tuberculosis.

Last year Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said only a third of the 120,000 people in need of antiretrovirals in Myanmar were getting the drugs, with up to 20,000 people dying each year due to a lack of treatment.

For the more physically able at the shelter - which mainly relies

on local donors for funds - a small sewing workshop offers the chance to earn some money by selling small embroidered belts and other clothing accessories.

Women and children work side by side, enjoying some respite from the anxieties of their illness.

Away from the country's dramatic political reforms and the international acclaim they have received, a few hundred men and women have found a refuge where they can live out the rest of their lives in dignity. - AFP