

Headline	US programme marks birth of one millionth HIV-free baby		
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US programme marks birth of one millionth HIV-free baby

WASHINGTON: This month somewhere in sub-Saharan Africa the one millionth baby will be born without HIV to a mother who suffers from the disease, thanks in large part to a decade-old US aid programme.

It is yet another remarkable step in the long fight against HIV and AIDS, as the United States and its global partners work towards what they call an AIDS-free generation, which just a decade ago would have been unimaginable.

Mother-to-baby transmission has long been a source of concern among governments and organizations working to control the spread of HIV. But more effective anti-retroviral drugs and regimens are now dramatically cutting the chances of an infected mother passing on the disease to her baby during preg-

nancy or breastfeeding.

The millionth baby born HIV-free was Tuesday to be trumpeted as part of celebrations to mark the 10th anniversary of the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, known by its acronym PEPFAR.

The biggest fall in transmission rates from mom to infant has come since 2009, US Global AIDS coordinator Eric Goosby told AFP.

"Somewhere round 430,000 babies are born annually with HIV and this project that we've been in really since the beginning of PEPFAR and has intensified over the last three years in partnership with UNAID and UNICEF," Goosby said.

The programme was working to "virtually eliminate pediatric HIV by 2015 and keep their mothers alive," he said, with aim of reduc-

ing the number of babies born with the infection to around 30,000 annually.

This is "a significant flag for PEPFAR" which works in 36 countries, he added, pointing to all the difficulties in reaching women in rural, poor and remote areas of the world. This involves not just identifying the mother, but getting her on a drugs programme and keeping her in treatment through that pregnancy and any later pregnancies -- not always an easy task in rural Africa.

Once the chances of a mother infecting her baby stood at around 30 percent, but now with the launch of a cocktail of three anti-retroviral drugs that has dropped to only about two percent, Goosby said. - AFP