

Headline **Standing up for condoms**
Date **12 Jun 2011**
MediaTitle **Sunday Star**
Section **Nation**
Journalist **N/A**
Frequency **Weekly**
Circ / Read **320,964 / 1,072,000**

Language **English**
Page No **31**
Article Size **261 cm²**
Color **Full Color**
ADValue **9,767**
PRValue **29,301**



Standing up for condoms

Contraceptive overcomes stiff opposition from the Vatican at AIDS summit

NEW YORK: A new condom home delivery service in India and the production of billions of extra contraceptives around the world highlight the breakthrough of condoms in helping put a brake on the AIDS pandemic, experts said.

An AIDS summit on Friday gave the most explicit UN backing yet to the use of condoms. Negotiators said they had to overcome fierce opposition from the Vatican and conservative Muslim countries to get the final communique to even mention the latex contraceptive.

Instead of talking simply about the importance of abstinence and fidelity, the statement stresses the "correct and consistent use of condoms". The Vatican led protests at the summit final session.

"It is a first at the UN General Assembly," said a UN diplomat who took part in two months of hard-fought negotiations on the text.

"We are very happy about this. It is very explicit and will definitely help our work to overcome resistance and fears about condoms," said George Tembo, head of the AIDS/HIV Department at the UN Population Fund.

The global need for condoms to combat HIV and for family planning has shot up from an estimated 13 billion in 2004 to about 19 billion in 2010, according to the UN Population Fund.

Tembo said the UN agency gave out about 3.2 billion condoms in target countries in 2010, up from 2.7 billion the year before.

India's Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad told the summit about the "door-to-door distribution" of male and female condoms by thousands of social health activists in his country.

The condoms will initially be delivered to homes in 17 Indian provinces covering an approximate population of 200 million people "and will be scaled up to cover the entire country soon," the minister said.

A similar effort is gathering pace in many countries, especially in Africa which has borne the brunt of the AIDS pandemic that has killed

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30 million people since it first appeared 30 years ago.

Cameroon gave out 145 million condoms between 2006 and 2010, said its Health Minister Andre Mama Fouda. "Major efforts have been made to make condoms available. The number of female condoms has increased sixfold between 2006 and 2010."

It helps, he said, but Cameroon, with a population of about 19.5 million still has about 560,000 people aged between 15 and 49 carrying the virus.

"We now have 305,000 children made orphans because of HIV and AIDS," said Fouda.

Tembo said governments and activists are slowly overcoming religious and social resistance to the

use of condoms.

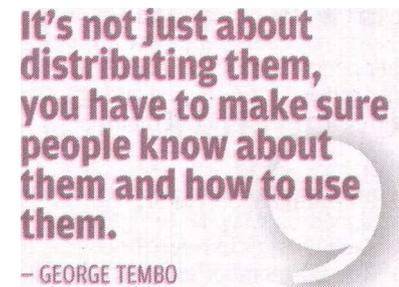
"It is not just distributing them, you have to make sure people know about them and know how to use them," he said.

So the UN Population Fund encourages social workers to get out to markets, pop festivals and sporting events such as last year's football World Cup in South Africa, to show people how to use prophylactics.

The increased use and other efforts by governments and doctors have been generally hailed at the summit, which has set a target of getting drugs to all AIDS sufferers by 2015. Is it enough?

"We must face the fact that all these efforts have yet to turn the tide of this epidemic.

"Three decades on, the rates of new infection still outpace treatment intervention, thereby compelling us to do more," South Africa's Vice-President Kgalema Motlanthe told a UN Security Council debate on the pandemic. — AFP



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— GEORGE TEMBO