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# A triumph for Thailand

## Country wins praise for experimental AIDS vaccine

**HONG KONG/BANGKOK:** An experimental AIDS vaccine that appears to be the first to protect people was mired for years in controversy, and credit for its success must go to Thailand where the trial was conducted, experts said.

The trial was criticised five years ago by 22 prominent US scientists who doubted it would have any effect. Washington was accused of wasting more than a US\$100mil (RM348mil) by funding it.

But Thai health authorities and their US partners at the National Institutes of Health and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research pressed on with the trial involving 16,000 volunteers in a country at the forefront of the battle against HIV.

"It was a tough decision. I am glad we made it," said Dr Anthony Fauci, director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, who defied the criticism and continued the trial.

The trial vaccine was made using two failed products - Sanofi-Pasteur's ALVAC canary pox/HIV vaccine and AIDSVAX, made by a San Francisco company called VaxGen and now owned by the non-profit Global Solutions for Infectious Disease.

Donald Burke, dean of the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health, said the trial was controversial from the start and had been dismissed by prominent US scientists because of the failure of previous vaccine tests.

"But given the importance of the AIDS epidemic, the decision was made to go forward regardless of these criticisms. It was a difficult choice, but a courageous choice," said Burke, who was head of AIDS research at Walter Reed before retiring in 1997.

Burke isolated the AIDS virus taken from a young HIV-infected Thai soldier in 1989 after Thai army doctors discovered an HIV outbreak among young recruits in Chiang Mai in northern Thailand.

That virus sample went on to become one of the seed viruses in the experimental vaccine, Burke

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said.

"To their credit the Thais did a remarkable job on this," Dr Eric Schoomaker, the Surgeon General of the US Army, said. "They did remarkable job of recruiting volunteers and conducting this trial almost flaw-

lessly."

The US\$105mil (RM365mil) trial was sponsored and paid for by the US government and results showed it cut the risk of infection by 31.2% among 16,402 volunteers over three years.

Those results mark a triumph for

Thailand, a country of 67 million people where a booming sex industry had stoked fears of a major epidemic. Local authorities battled hard against a disease that threatened to spiral out of control some 20 years ago. -- Reuters