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One in four Bali sex workers is HIV positive

JAKARTA: The number of known HIV/AIDS cases on the Indonesian resort island of Bali is soaring, with one in four prostitutes there reported to be HIV-positive.

A new report by the National AIDS Commission said the number of HIV infections on the island had jumped almost 19% to 3,778 this year, with 597 more cases.

"The figure is only the tip of the iceberg ... we estimate the actual number of cases to hover around 7,000 as many cases were unreported," said the commission's Bali spokesman in Bali, Nyoman Mangku Karmaya.

"Many people are reluctant to go for medical check-ups as there's still a stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV/AIDS," he said yesterday.

The number of cases this year has risen sharply from 1,253 cases in 2006 and 590 in 2004.

Karmaya said about 25% of the estimated 8,800 sex workers in Bali were infected with HIV this year, up from 23% last year, adding that the virus was transmitted from clients who refused to use condoms.

While describing the trend as "worrying", he said most tourists visit Bali for the culture and scenery, not for sex.

"There might be some who get acquainted with the sex workers, but they're aware about using condoms," Karmaya said.

However, he warned that there could be more than 840 new infections in Bali every year if the spread is not contained.

"We will increase our efforts to provide more information and educate the sex workers as well as the public. We'll also intensify campaigns promoting condom use," he added. — AFP