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Resistance to AIDS drugs emerging in parts of Africa

PARIS: Resistance to AIDS drugs, a problem that has been widely feared over the last decade, is growing in parts of Africa but should not hamper the life-saving drug roll-out, researchers reported.

Tiny genetic mutations that make HIV immune to key frontline drugs have been increasing in eastern and southern Africa, something that should be a clear warning to health watchdogs, they said.

"Without continued and increased national and international efforts, rising HIV drug resistance could jeopardise a decade-long trend of decreasing HIV/AIDS-related illness and death in low- and middle-income countries," they said.

The study, published in *The Lancet*, is funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the European Union (EU).

It is the widest-ever analysis of a risk that has haunted AIDS campaigners since 2003, when drugs started to be rolled out to poorer countries that are home to more than 90% of people with the AIDS virus.

The nightmare is that – as with bacteria which become resistant to antibiotics –

strains of HIV will emerge that will blunt the armoury of antiretrovirals, leaving millions defenceless.

Silvia Bertagnolio from the UN's World Health Organisation and Ravindra Gupta at University College London looked at published cases of HIV resistance and supplemented this with data from the WHO itself.

Over eight years, prevalence of resistant virus in untreated people soared from around 1% to 7.3% in eastern Africa, and from 1% to 3.7% in southern Africa, they found.

Similar rates of 3.5-7.6% were also found in western and central Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean.

The difference, though, is that they remained quite stable throughout this period, and did not experience such a big rise.

Around 33 million people around the world have HIV.

In 2011, about eight million badly infected people in poorer countries had access to HIV-suppressing drugs, a figure 26 times greater than the number in 2003 but still only just over half of those in need. – AFP