

Low Prevalence but High Risk

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Low Prevalence but High Risk: This is how Pakistan has been categorized in comity of nations in terms of AIDS. Another World Aids Day passed by with usual rituals of statements and seminars. Apart from disease statistics, spreading figures, existing trends, dismal efforts and occasional high points, one aspect neglected in terms of AIDS is significant number of expatriates Pakistanis returning back to homeland after being deported and sent back from all parts of the globe especially after 9/11 possibly exposed to AIDS much more than local population. By conservative estimates number of such forced home-returnees runs into around half a million during last two years. These expatriates side by side with other tourists, whatever fewer do come to Pakistan, should be mandatory tested for communicable diseases as populace of 'liberal and open societies' of developed world is more at risk from this deadly disease than average Pakistanis. But regrettably there is no mechanism of certifying disease free status of immigrants to Pakistan conversely Pakistani expatriates have to undergo rigorous medical testing prior to embarkation and visa obtaining. It is high time that state initiative is taken.

Figures quoted by state does not reflect the kind of danger and devastation faced by some 'high prevalence' countries but authenticity and genuineness of such figures keeping in view state mechanism and infrastructure are doubted by certain quarters. There is definitely a need for proper data collection, maintenance and dissemination mechanism being consistently demanded of our state by many international organizations.

Funding to combat this menace is also a tricky proposition. State kitty having already in red is least likely to contribute significantly for this purpose. Keeping up with past traditions and trends international donors, being the 'whistle-blowers, are expected to pour in some financial 'aid' to combat 'AIDS'. But due across the horizon/nationality spread and prevalence of this deadly disease even in most developed countries significant financial contribution is expected from international donors. These developed countries being themselves the donees and controlling international donor organizations would definitely give priority to their own populace and are likely to dole out peanuts to developing world (including Pakistan) for the purpose. Being considered 'low prevalence', Pakistan figures quite low on the list of countries especially the 'high prevalence' countries in terms of getting financial support. Scenario seems depressing but from self-sufficiency and self-reliance perspective could be an eye opener for slumbering state and citizens.

Need of the moment is an all out effective mass media campaign. To undertake this task, state is suitably equipped when one recalls giant-sized-full-page-state-sponsored-ads depicting yearly, 100 days progress and education campaigns of Punjab Government. Not to forget mechanism of local bodies and around 50 TV channels, devising and launching an effective result oriented mass awareness campaign is within the reach and competence of state. But this campaign must maintain delicate balance and right mix of Islamic values and traditions coupled with awareness and precautionary material. It must avoid outrageously liberal and open messages (like Agha Khan Board style surveys for school girls) alienating mostly religiously minded population of the country living in countryside. As regards, the already affected AIDS populace, for the time being, humanities is helpless and could just pray. Fortunately, major sources of AIDS in Pakistan e.g. sex-workers, drug/syringe users and expatriates/tourists are not only identifiable but also manageable and controllable.

Joining the war against AIDS, on behalf of Parliamentarian's Commission on Human Rights this scribe and Senator Dr. Shahzad Waseem chaired sessions of First Asia-Pacific Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS Best Practices Conference and actively participated in drafting and finalizing 'Islamabad Agenda for Change 2004' to kick off a war against this crippling disease.

This low prevalence but high risk has placed Pakistan on policy cross roads whether to brush this under the carpet or openly face it by breaking the taboo over talking about sex. Former having failed in most of the countries, latter is gaining rapidly gaining currency around the world nowadays. It is quite evident that state alone is not capable of handling such gigantic task keeping in view existing infrastructure, priorities, financial crunch and other socio-cultural dimensions hence needs active supplementation and complementation of civil society in war against AIDS which must commence without any further delay.

This year's Human Rights day's resolve would also be to educate and sensitize humans of our part of globe to understand their rights to safe and healthy life as other rights are off-shoots of basic existence which is greatly endangered by AIDS.

Now is the time to check and finish off this epidemic in streets before it enters our bedrooms.

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