

Corporate Response to HIV/AIDS

By A. VENKATA NARAYANA

In the war against HIV/AIDS, India's private sector has begun to realize the dangers that the pandemic can cause to economies. The business community was initially in the old mind-set, believing that the onus of handling the disease lay with government agencies, volunteer groups and public health organizations. But now that the virus has grown to monstrous proportions—and the country's 5.1 million infected adults put India in the red-alert zone—the private sector has realized the dangers and the impact it will have on the economy.

"HIV/AIDS is more than a health crisis," U.S. Ambassador David C. Mulford told business leaders at a conference in Calcutta in August. "It can cause major damage to economies, with far-reaching implications. In high-prevalence countries, HIV/AIDS erodes economic growth through its negative impact on labor supply, productivity, savings and the delivery of essential services. AIDS increases the costs of doing business, especially for small businesses."

For many businesses the impact of HIV/AIDS is noticeable. They lose the ability to be competitive if workers infected with HIV are in the productive age group. Frequent absenteeism and premature retirement from service reduce business profitability. Mulford emphasized: "HIV/AIDS has potentially catastrophic consequences. It has killed 20 million people throughout the world, leaving in its wake grieving families, millions of orphans and damaged economies."

Globally, more than half of the nearly 40 million people with HIV/AIDS are workers, according to S.Y. Quraishi, director-general of India's National AIDS Control Organisation, or NACO. Hence, it is an issue for both the workforce and the management.

At a July conference in Chennai of the Confederation of Indian Industry, Tarun Das, its chief mentor, asked industry for sharing of ideas about how corporations, small businesses and the government can help protect their employees and create a momentum for a comprehensive and broad national response to the threat posed by the disease.

To help India scale up initiatives to prevent and control HIV/AIDS at the workplace, President George W. Bush announced a package of \$7 million in July when he met with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Washington, D.C. They recognized that the pandemic is one of the greatest challenges facing humankind in the 21st century and reiterated their commitment to combat the disease on a global scale.

During the meeting, the Indian and American leaders agreed to speed up the

review of generic antiretroviral drugs by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. (Eight of the 10 drugs approved so far are made in India.) They also explored new opportunities for public-private collaboration on the development of HIV/AIDS drugs and for clinical trials in India.

The U.S. concern about this global menace is highlighted in President Bush's 2003 Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a five-year, \$15 billion initiative aimed at turning the tide against HIV/AIDS in more than 120 countries. The plan has been providing facilities for the support and treatment of two million people living with HIV/AIDS, preventing seven million new infections, taking care of 10 million people infected with and affected by HIV, spreading awareness among people and promoting research.

In India, NACO statistics say that 90 percent of the 5.1 million infected people are aged 15-49. Only 7,000 of the estimated 600,000 people who need antiretroviral drug therapy were receiving such treatment through government programs as of March. By the end of this decade, the number of Indians with the disease is likely to grow to 25 million, according to NACO's Quraishi.

Quoting estimates of the Asian Development Bank, Quraishi told a Chennai industry seminar that businesses lost \$7 billion due to HIV/AIDS in 2001. If the trend continues, the figure could reach \$17 billion by 2010. There are varied estimates of productivity loss from absenteeism by diseased workers, but all studies agree that economic costs due to the



President Bush and Prime Minister Singh address a press conference on July 18 at the White House, after Indian and American leaders reached several agreements, including a commitment to work jointly to combat the global challenge of HIV/AIDS.

epidemic are significant.

Industrialists are worried. Recently, the Bombay Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in collaboration with the Indian Association of Occupational Health and the Avert Society, organized a conference on "Workplace Interventions for the Prevention of HIV/AIDS." Representatives from more than 445 companies expressed their concern about the deadly virus.

In his keynote address at the Mumbai conference, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the U.S. Embassy, Robert O. Blake, spoke about the need to bring into the fight not only the big corporations but also the medium, small and unorganized sectors. "We need to expand our efforts to include the workers in the unorganized sector who are highly vulnerable to the disease but who have the least access to health care. We cannot leave out the unorganized sector, which makes such a huge contribution to the Indian economy," Blake said.

The participants agreed to prepare a common workplace policy for industry and to frame workplace protocols. This is aimed at educating workers and managers about HIV/AIDS so that they do not fear contracting the virus at work and will not dismiss or shun workers with the disease—actions that make it much less likely the infected will seek medical testing and treatment. The industrialists agreed that workplace policies and programs are good ways to educate the staff, though providing needed treatment to the sick is more complicated. That will depend on programs that companies provide to take care of workers' health and welfare in the organized and unorganized sectors and develop a multi-pronged response to HIV/AIDS in the workplace.

The leaders agreed that the private sector has to frame policies that provide information about preventing or controlling the epidemic, and also ensure improved morale of the workforce.

The leaders also discussed these points:

- There is a need to engage in ongoing workplace programs devoted to educating and training employees about HIV/AIDS. Social stigma attached to the disease persists, inhibiting alteration of behaviors that contribute to the spread of the disease. There should be confidentiality about the medical condition of a worker and nondiscrimination against those who have the disease.

- The AIDS workplace program has to be implemented in all corporations, but to sustain the policy, advocacy groups within the businesses should take the lead.

- The health care and related costs incurred by companies having employees with HIV/AIDS can be a significant burden, particularly in areas where incidence of the disease is high. The private sector must earmark funds to meet those expenses.

- Industry must employ and train doctors to deal with positive cases, provide free testing and counseling on a confidential basis, and provide antiretroviral drug therapy to employees.

- The private sector must partner with voluntary organizations to provide employment. Job seekers should not be discriminated against or stigma attached to them on the basis of real or perceived HIV status. Job applicants must not be screened or tested for the disease.

- The private sector must establish a fund that will be used by micro-enterprises that are subsidiaries of big corporations, but not economically sound enough to pay the medical bills of their employees.

- Counseling helplines must be set up and HIV/AIDS peer educators appointed for ongoing awareness training and counseling. The private sector must help form local AIDS committees that will develop AIDS awareness and prepare prevention materials.

- Multinational corporations and big industrial houses must build partnerships at the global level with governmental and non-governmental agencies and medical institutions.

- Corporations must ensure better rela-

tions between the employer and the employees, since a successful HIV/AIDS policy and program requires cooperation, trust and dialogue.

- AIDS can be prevented through information and education, attitudes and behavior; training women to protect themselves can help contain the spread of HIV.

While business leadership and action on AIDS is crucial, these cannot solve the AIDS emergency, but only supplement the role played by governments, medical service agencies and political leaders. The business community can be more effective as a support and pressure group for the government to act through examples of good practices. □

Leading by Example

A glimpse of the U.S. government's commitment to combat HIV/AIDS is seen in its Embassy workplace policy announced in December. More than 1,800 employees in the Embassy in New Delhi and the three consulates in Calcutta, Chennai and Mumbai will be trained in prevention and in provision of care and support for the infected and their spouses. Highlighting the mission's policy toward HIV/AIDS, Ambassador David C. Mulford says: "I want to underline that AIDS prevention is everyone's responsibility. I have made this one of my top priorities as a manager of a large corporation. I am concerned about the health and the welfare of the U.S. Embassy employees."

The workforce policy provides a non-discriminatory atmosphere for Embassy employees infected with the disease, and gives information on how they can be assisted by the mission to remain healthy and productive. The Embassy management will maintain absolute confidentiality of existing employees' medical information and information submitted by new recruits.

About 50 peer educators, who will be appointed from among the staff, will spend time with their colleagues discussing and providing information about the disease. The Embassy is also planning to hold four workshops for peer educators over the next year. □