

## Why we should care about AIDS overseas

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In the waning days of his presidency, Bill Clinton declared HIV a threat to US national security. This declaration sparked interesting discussions among the pundits in the national media, but only briefly. The designation of HIV as a national security threat stemmed from a declassified CIA estimate of the impact, on this country, of spreading worldwide diseases. In the developing world, nearly half of all deaths are attributed to treatable infectious diseases. The national intelligence estimate found that five deadly infectious diseases-AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and hepatitis B and C-are either spreading or becoming more drug resistant.

In preparing to write this essay, I have been hard-pressed to find anyone who feels threatened by the HIV pandemic or even interested enough to discuss it. Cynthia Tucker, of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, suggests that Americans are too busy assessing their 401(k)s, envying Regis Philbin's wardrobe, and shopping on eBay to pay much attention to the global AIDS situation.<sup>1</sup> She says that Americans have become too insular and self-absorbed, unconcerned with health care for the poor of their own nation, much less for the millions of indigent AIDS patients in places like Africa. Most Americans don't understand that increasing chaos in developing countries, induced by the HIV epidemic, threatens many of our national interests, ranging from the viability of foreign-based US businesses to the safety of Americans living in countries with unstable governments.

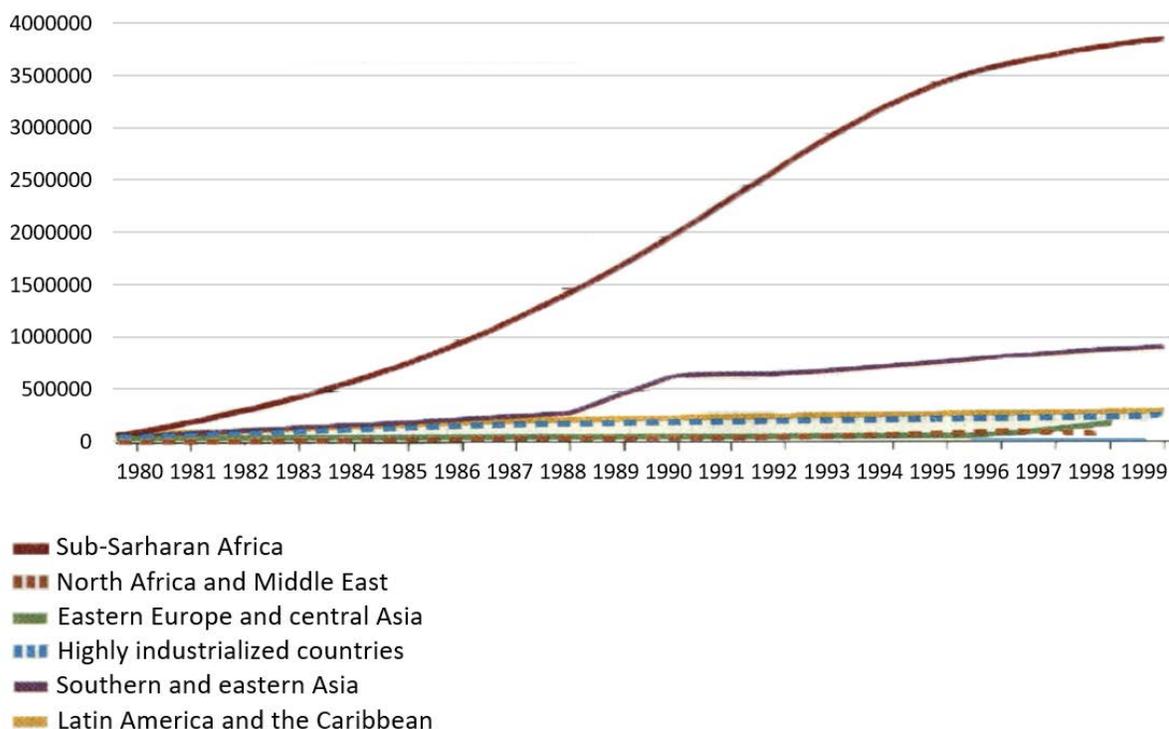
The AIDS crisis in Africa is as destabilizing as any terrorist attack or armed conflict. Peter Piot, MD, PhD, executive director of UN AIDS (the coordinating agency for a group of United Nations organizations) and an assistant secretary general of the United Nations (UN), notes that of the 33.6 million people infected with HIV worldwide, about 70% more than 25 million individuals-reside in sub Saharan Africa (see Figure 1, page 19).<sup>2,3</sup> In that region alone, 5,500 AIDS victims are buried every day.<sup>4</sup> Of the 4 million Africans who have advanced HIV, a scant 10,000 can afford antiretroviral therapy; the rest are dying. Forty million children will lose one or both parents to AIDS over the next decade, and millions of orphans are already growing up on the streets. More schoolteachers are dying of AIDS than can be trained to replace them. The economies of many sub-Saharan countries are on the brink of collapse, having lost so many productive workers to AIDS.

Why does the HIV epidemic in the developing world threaten our own economy? With more and more jobs in this country dependent on foreign trade, a crisis in any part of the world threatens our economic security. If AIDS spreads at its current rate, the consequences to the US economy may be similar to the recent turmoil created when Asian economies soured. The dual challenges of poverty and disease undermine the viability of developing nations and take the lives of people in what should be their most productive years. In southern Africa, for example, life expectancy is predicted to drop from a peak of 59 years in the early 1990s to 45 years between 2005 and 2010- because of AIDS.<sup>2</sup> These massive losses of human resources abroad may have profound repercussions here at home. As President Clinton pointed out during a .trip to Asia late in his final term, it is the weaknesses of nations, not their strengths that threaten the US vision for the future.

The AIDS epidemic is far from over. All of us rich, poor, old, and young-should feel concerned. We can no longer harbor the attitude that "we have the medicine, they have the disease." Pharmaceutical companies must donate more or deeply discount antiretroviral drugs to impoverished nations in Africa and other parts of the world. We must work with the wealthier nations to invest in HIV prevention and care in poorer nations. We should continue to support federal legislation like the bill signed late last year that created a \$1.1 billion trust fund through the World Bank to fight AIDS and other emerging diseases. The \$200 million proposed for this fund by the current administration (72 cents per American) is simply

not enough.<sup>5</sup> One encouraging sign is the UN summit on AIDS held in late June of this year. The 3-day meeting led to a Declaration of Commitment that set specific goals for prevention and treatment for 2003, 2005, and 2010.<sup>6,7</sup> Some African nations have already shown that aggressive public education, public health, and treatment programs can curb the spread of AIDS. But a massive global challenge needs massive global resources. The UN summit calls on the nations of the world to raise \$7 to \$10 billion a year for AIDS prevention and treatment programs. Providing such assistance is not only a matter of solidarity with our fellow nations, it is ultimately essential to our own good health.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 1. Estimated number of new HIV infections by region and year, 1980-1999



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