

HIV Rate Among Women In Swaziland Now 42 Percent

Written by Rudi Prinsloo

Sunday, 22 February 2009 02:25 -



By Thulani Mthethwa

Some 42 percent of pregnant women in Swaziland are infected with the virus that causes AIDS, a jump of 3 percent since last year, according to a government report released Friday.

The small southern African nation has the highest AIDS rate in the world and average life expectancy is just 37 years as a result. The report said the increase in 2008 was partly because more women were taking life-prolonging antiretroviral medication.

An estimated 185,000 of Swaziland's 1 million people are HIV positive, and about 30,000 are currently receiving antiretrovirals.

AIDS activists blame King Mswati III for doing too little to spread prevention messages and promote condom usage and HIV testing, and they say he sets a bad example by having 13 wives.

"The nation, especially polygamous men, look up to the monarch," said Sphiwe Hlophe, who runs a support group called Swaziland Positive Living.

The king, Africa's last absolute monarch, is widely revered. But he attracted widespread criticism last year for lavish celebrations to celebrate his 40th birthday and Swaziland's 40th anniversary of independence from Britain at a time when the health sector is crumbling under the burden of AIDS.

Health Minister Benedict Xaba voiced disappointment at the increase in new infections among young women, indicating that education campaigns are not working.

"There is therefore a need to accelerate HIV prevention efforts especially those targeted at youth," he said.

Swaziland is promoting male circumcision - which can cut the risk of HIV infection by as much as 60 percent. But there are fears that this might backfire by making men more complacent and more likely to have unprotected sexual intercourse.

Source : Sapa-AP /po/clh

Date : 20 Feb 2009 12:58