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HEALTH-IRAN: Drug Addiction Spreading HIV/AIDS

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TEHRAN, Mar 6 (IPS) - A major transit point for the global traffic in narcotics, Iran has a fast growing population of drug addicts who have become the main cause for the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS in the Islamic nation.

The deadly disease was first detected in Iran in the year 1987 in a six-year-old haemophiliac boy who had got it from HIV- contaminated blood imported into the country.

According to Bahram Yeganeh, director of Iran's National AIDS Prevention Committee, there were 2,271 registered AIDS cases in the country till Feb. 14. However, AIDS expert Minou Mohraz, believes that the total number of people in the country living with HIV/AIDS, could be between 20,000 to 30,000. Health Minister Mohammad Farhadi has described the HIV/AIDS problem in Iran as a "time bomb".

"There is a time bomb ticking in Iran and we have to take it seriously," he told a conference in Tehran last year, ahead of World AIDS Day Dec. 1. Iran's AIDS control authorities, however, say that the pattern of HIV spread in this country is different from the global trend.

World statistics indicate that about eight out of every 10 HIV positive people, become so after sexual contact with a person with HIV, 12 percent from using HIV-infected syringes and less than four percent after getting a transfusion of HIV-contaminated blood.

According to data provided by Iran's AIDS Prevention Committee, nearly 70 percent of HIV positive people in Iran have used infected syringes and 13 percent had sexual contact with an HIV positive person.

Another 9.5 percent became HIV positive from infected blood. About one percent cases are caused by HIV positive mothers transmitting the virus to newly born babies.

According to AIDS official Yeganeh, most HIV positive people in Iran are drug addicts. The country is a major transit route for narcotics coming from neighboring Afghanistan and Pakistan and destined for Europe, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region.

Yeganeh says that current estimates show that Iran has more than two million drug addicts. Of these, 300,000 inject the drug into their bodies using syringes.

There is a high incidence of HIV positive cases in Iran's jails. "In 1996, 400 prisoners out of a total number of 500 inmates were tested for HIV in a prison. A staggering 146 inmates tested HIV positive. Most of those cases were caused by dirty needles," says Yeganeh.

Health and prison officials complain of the lack of medical treatment available in prisons. "We have a problem keeping the prisoners off drugs, we are suffering from lack of space," Tehran prison chief Morteza Bakhtiari was quoted as saying.

Some prison guards are said to be involved in the smuggling of drugs into jails. New convicts are known to smuggle the narcotics into prisons, hiding the drugs in their stomachs.

Though rigid religious taboos are credited with having checked the spread of HIV through sexual contact, public health experts and media commentators warn that it would be foolish to be complacent on this score.

Concern has been expressed about the growing number of foreign commercial sex workers visiting Iran, posing as tourists. About 70 percent of Iran's people are under 30 years old and large numbers of young men are now travelling outside the country.

Every day, more than 60 tourist buses leave Iran for adjoining nations. Most of the travellers are young people. The number of young Iranians getting married has also been declining in recent years, which is attributed by sociologists to growing unemployment.

Public health experts are worrying that all this could lead to a growth of extramarital relations, which will further help spread HIV.

According to U.N. statistics, Iran ranks 27th among countries that have been most successful in tackling HIV/AIDS.

The Iranian government has taken a series of steps toward AIDS prevention and control in the last few years, including law enforcement action against drug traffickers and AIDS education workshops and training programmes.

Medication for people with AIDS is being distributed by the health ministry and prison authorities. However, Iran's anti-AIDS efforts have been criticised for neglecting the vital role played by public education. Public health authorities have been accused of not actively educating people about HIV/AIDS.

After repeated calls by experts for the inclusion of AIDS education in school textbooks, the government finally broke its silence on the issue this year. According to government health official and AIDS specialist, Minou Mohraz, the subject will be included in school textbooks "in the near future."

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