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AU launches fresh education drive to halt spread of HIV

AFRICAN leaders have launched a drive to halt new HIV infections, saying that prevention may be the best remaining hope to stop the HIV/AIDS pandemic from cutting an ever-deeper swathe across the continent.

The African Union (AU) said yesterday that education, counselling, testing and condom distribution could stop 29-million of the 45-million new HIV cases projected to occur worldwide between 2002 and 2010.

“Africa must seize the moment to stop HIV,” AU Commission chairman Alpha Konare said in a statement released yesterday at the launch in Johannesburg of the Acceleration of Prevention of HIV Initiative in the African Region.

While global attention has focused on HIV treatment, including antiretrovirals, to help Africa combat the AIDS crisis, new HIV infections continue unabated across the continent.

The new campaign, launched with several UN agencies, aims to highlight the need for HIV prevention during this year and to co-ordinate campaigns to educate people to avoid infection.

South African Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, speaking at the southern African launch, said that the emphasis on prevention was overdue.

“Over the past few years, there has been a great deal of engagement over the issues relating only to access to treatment,” she said.

“Let us all support this endeavour to ensure that prevention resumes its rightful position as the mainstay of the global response to HIV and AIDS.”

SA dropped its official objections to antiretrovirals in 2003 and now has one of the world’s largest antiretroviral programmes — albeit one that reaches only about 100000 people, or half the number of South Africans that AIDS kills every year.

Government, meanwhile, continues to promote a grassroots response to the pandemic, with the emphasis on basic health care, nutrition, abstinence programmes and condoms.

The new AU initiative reflects many of these priorities, highlighting the need both to educate people about the virus and to provide more testing to stop new transmissions.

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