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SUBHEADLINE: On the 20th International Aids Day, the news is grim. Despite efforts to halt the disease, deaths and infection rates continue to rise

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'One good thing about HIV and Aids is that it doesn't discriminate between people ... whether they're rich, poor, middle-class, black, yellow, white ...' comments Pimjai Intamoon

That poignant remark is striking because it doesn't come from some misery guts who's delighting from afar in other people's suffering. Pimjai, young, brave and one Thailand's standard-bearers in the fight against the HIV/Aids pandemic, lost her husband six years ago to Aids. She has been HIV-positive herself for 14 years, and she's also chief director of the Teddy Bear Project at the Community Health Project in Chiang Mai.

Yet Pimjai is able to ``thank'' the disease ``for having helped me realise the value of existence''.

Every day Pimjai mingles with people from a wide variety of social backgrounds and ethnicity in the cosy muddle of her workroom in the suburbs of Chiang Mai.

Here, a dozen or so adults, most of them affected by the disease, work producing teddy bears, dolls, purses and other items to benefit the project.

Today _ December 1, the ``20th World Aids Day'' _ makes Pimjai's comment about the grim equality of Aids startlingly clear. Few societies have been spared in its deadly march.

Appalling facts and figures splashed across the media show the reality _ 20 years after the first clinical evidence of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome was reported, Aids has become ``the most devastating disease humankind has ever faced''.

``It will get worse before it gets better,'' said Dr Peter Piot, executive director of the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids recently.

Since the disease began, more than 60 million people have been infected with the virus. HIV/Aids is now the leading cause of death in sub-Saharan Africa. It is the fourth-biggest killer in the world, according to a UNAIDS/WHO publication this month.

Some 40 million people are estimated to be living with HIV/Aids. This year alone, some five million people have been newly affected and around three million people have died of the disease.

No region of the world has been spared.

Statistics showing low prevalence rates can be misleading. ``They often disguise serious epidemics that are initially concentrated in certain localities or among specific population groups and that threaten to spill over into the wider population,'' says UNAIDS/WHO in a report.

Take Burma, where nationwide prevalence has been put at two percent. ``Yet national HIV rates as high as 60 percent are being registered among injecting drug users and almost 40 percent among sex workers.''

``Today, we are seeing rapidly emerging epidemics in several countries that had previously recorded relatively low rates of HIV infection _ proof that the epidemic can emerge quickly and unexpectedly and that no society is immune,'' notes the report, referring to countries such as Indonesia, Nepal and Vietnam.

In the avalanche of figures related to the pandemic, some are especially arresting, since they reveal new trends in the global crisis.

Eastern Europe, for example: A new report released two days ago notes that the number of HIV infections in this region of Europe is ``rising faster than anywhere else in the world''.

``Reported figures are largely underestimated but even so, the latest figures reveal there were more than 75,000 reported new infections in Russia by early November, that is a 15-fold increase in just three years,''

says the UNAIDS/WHO report.

Meantime, the epidemic continues its rapid spread throughout Africa with 3.4 million new infections and 2.3 million deaths in 2001.

The impact on the development of societies and well-being of economies is becoming more and more worrying as the epidemic spreads.

In Swaziland, Botswana and some areas of South Africa, more than 30 percent of pregnant women are HIV-positive. In sub-Saharan Africa, the hardest hit countries could lose more than 20 percent of their GDP by 2020 because of Aids, according to the report. In high-income countries, the increase of unsafe sex is a new worrying trend, since it's triggering a rise in sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. In these countries, there is now evidence the disease is moving into poorer communities. In Asia, figures also continue to climb. ``For the first time despite effective prevention efforts in some smaller countries, the number of newly infected people reached one million. There is a serious threat of major, generalised epidemics,' ' says the report.

According to the Division of Epidemiology, Ministry of Public Health (as of September 30) the official number of Aids patients in Thailand is roughly 180,000, with so far nearly 50,000 deaths.

However, when taking into account people who are declared HIV positive, the figure leaps to roughly one million (according to the Aids Division of the Ministry of Public Health). Not to mention the enormous proportion in Thailand as elsewhere, of people carrying the virus without knowing it.

The distribution of HIV/Aids patients in Thailand is three men for one woman _ an uneven distribution which matches the global figures showing men account for the largest proportion of people living with the deadly virus.

It is this unequal distribution between the sexes that's behind a two-year UNAIDS focus on the role of men in the Aids epidemic, under the slogan ``I care... do you?''

Men contribute to the Aids epidemic in many ways but they also can play a role in tackling it. ``Insecurity permeates the lives and families of individuals affected by HIV/Aids. Aids also shatters the security of whole societies, communities and economies. Indeed it is one of the biggest obstacles to development itself. It affects regional and global stability and risks slowing democratic development. In this way, Aids not only takes

away the present. It takes away the future. That is the toll of Aids," commented UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the occasion of World Aids Day.

"Men make a difference" says the slogan that's also a challenge to men _ it's a matter of survival.

* The 5th International Conference on Home and Community Care for Persons Living with HIV/Aids will be held in Chiang Mai from December 17 to 20.

Facts on Aids

An estimated 11.8 million young people aged 15-24 are living with HIV/Aids. Most of them are girls. Half of all new infections _ almost 6,000 daily _ are occurring among young people.

Ignorance about the epidemic is widespread among young people, many of whom do not know how to protect themselves from HIV.

Young people are key to controlling HIV/Aids. They have the right to knowledge and skills that reduce their vulnerability.

At least 10.4 million children currently under 15 have lost their mother or both parents to the epidemic).

The total number of children to lose their mother or both parents is forecast to more than double by 2010.

Children whose parents have died are less likely to access services and attend school than those who have not lost a parent.

In 2001 alone, an estimated 800,000 children under 15 acquired HIV _ over 90 per cent of them through mother-to-child transmission. (MTCT)

HIV can be transmitted to an infant during pregnancy, labour and delivery or breastfeeding.

Mother-to-child transmission can be prevented through effective voluntary counselling and testing, antiretroviral therapy or the use of long-term regimens of MTCT prevention, safe delivery practices, and safe feeding options.

Sources: UNAIDS and UNICEF