



## ***DoD HIV/AIDS Prevention Program Status Report:***

### ***Democratic Republic of the Congo***



## **BACKGROUND**

### **Introduction/General Information**

The population of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DROC) is estimated to be between 50 and 55 million people with a reported life expectancy of 49 to 51 years. French is the official language of DROC, which has an estimated literacy rate of 77%. DROC, a country with extensive potential wealth, is experiencing an internal war, which contributes to a weakened and contracting economy. Annual per capita income in DROC is approximately \$600.

### **Country HIV/AIDS Statistics and Risk Factors**

HIV/AIDS prevalence in DROC is estimated at 5% of the population, while the number of people believed to be living with HIV is 1.3 million. Identified risk factors include heterosexual contact with multiple partners and commercial sex workers. Groups of commercial sex workers tested in country have HIV seroprevalence rates as high as 30%.

### **Military HIV/AIDS Information**

The size of the Congolese Armed Forces (CAF) is estimated to be 1,000,000. Because the CAF has not performed force-wide testing, HIV seroprevalence rates are unavailable but are believed to exceed the national average.

## **PROPOSED PROGRAM**

In September 2001 DHAPP staff received a proposal titled *Plan to Prevent the Spread of the HIV/AIDS Infection in the Congolese Armed Forces*, the major goals of which are to:

- Reduce personnel vulnerability through improved HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted infection (STI) awareness,
- Encourage behavioral change,
- Improve access to and promote acceptance of condoms,
- Increase awareness among senior military leaders,
- Provide care through extant healthcare facilities, and
- Expand capacity of healthcare facilities for diagnosing and treating STI/HIV/AIDS.

## **PROGRAM RESPONSE**

### **Military-to-Military**

DHAPP staff visited DROC in May 2002 for the purpose of pilot testing a proposed UN Peacekeepers' HIV Field Manual with peacekeepers stationed in DROC. During this time, staff made initial contacts with DROC military HIV prevention personnel, and discussed future proposals for continued and expanded funding.

A booklet titled *HIV and Peacekeeping Forces Field Manual* was evaluated by a focus group consisting of 15 members representing 11 nations. The manual was very well received and understood by all. The focus group recommended that the manual be translated into Spanish, Arabic, and Swahili, and that it include illustrations of proper use of male and female condoms.

In May 2002, a DHAPP representative toured medical facilities at major bases and made the following recommendations:

- Upgrade medical facilities,
- Provide medical equipment and supplies, and
- Provide training in management of STI/HIV/AIDS and infection control.

#### **Contractor-Based Assistance**

The University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, received a DHAPP contract to identify and quantify HIV risk-taking behavior in the CAF. UNC trained a cadre of peer educators whom they called *Popular Opinion Leaders* (POLs). POLs were given training in HIV/AIDS prevention, safer sex practices, and proper condom use. In

addition, POLs were given training and materials that they used to train their peers using a combination of modeling, role-playing, and supplemental educational materials.

### **PROGRAM IMPACT**

#### **Master Trainers and Peer Educators**

Under UNC's program, 16 medical personnel completed courses and apprenticeships in syndromic management of STIs at Kinshasa's reference clinic for sexually transmitted diseases.

#### **Potential Number of Troops Affected**

Up to 1,000,000 troops may be reached through these programs.

#### **Laboratory Capability/Infrastructure**

UNC refurbished and enhanced the capabilities of 2 military health clinics providing basic equipment and medications to enable syndromic management of STI/HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other infectious diseases.