



DoD HIV/AIDS Prevention Program Status Report:

Eritrea



BACKGROUND

Introduction/General Information

The population of Eritrea is estimated to be between 3.8 and 4.5 million people, with a life expectancy of 52 to 57 years. Eritrea has several regional languages (Afar, Amharic, Arabic, Tigre, Kunama, and Tigrinya), with an estimated literacy rate of 25%. The economy is based primarily in subsistence agriculture, with 80% of the population involved in farming or herding. Annual per capita income ranges from \$200 to \$740.

Country HIV/AIDS Statistics and Risk Factors

HIV/AIDS prevalence in Eritrea is estimated at 2.9%, while the number of people living with HIV or AIDS ranges from 55,000 to 70,000. Identified risk factors include high-risk heterosexual contact with multiple partners, perinatal transmission, and transmission through blood and blood products.

Military HIV/AIDS Information

The Eritrean Defense Force (EDF) is estimated to have 300,000 personnel on active duty. The EDF tested new recruits in 1997 for HIV and found an infection rate of 2.6%. Despite this relatively low rate, some health officials believe that the military population currently has HIV prevalence rates that exceed the national average.

PROPOSED PROGRAM

The EDF submitted an HIV/AIDS prevention plan to DHAPP in May 2001 requesting funding to support the following activities:

- Develop an HIV prevention program emphasizing behavioral change communication,
- Ensure an adequate supply and distribution of condoms,
- Train peer educators in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV prevention,
- Establish a voluntary counseling and testing (VCT) program, and
- Provide medical/psychosocial care for persons living with AIDS.

PROGRAM RESPONSE

Military-to-Military

In February 2001, DHAPP staff participated in the *Working Group for the Development of a Comprehensive HIV Prevention Package for the Uniformed Services of Africa*, held in Accra, Ghana. Staff met with EDF members to discuss and refine the Eritrean HIV prevention plan. In October 2001, Eritrea was awarded the first of several installments of funding to implement its prevention plan. In November 2002, DHAPP staff (including 3 military infectious disease specialists, an HIV clinical laboratory supervisor, and a logistician) traveled to

Eritrea to conduct a needs assessment with EDF personnel and facilitate DHAPP-sponsored prevention efforts.

The logistician determined that better computer capabilities and Internet access would enhance HIV/AIDS prevention capabilities for the EDF and provided these services in December 2002. Computer training for HIV/AIDS prevention program staff was provided. The assessment also revealed the need for photocopying, fax, and scanning equipment, which was purchased and transferred to the EDF in April 2003.

Contractor-Based Assistance

In August 2001, Population Services International (PSI) was awarded a DHAPP contract to conduct the following activities for the EDF:

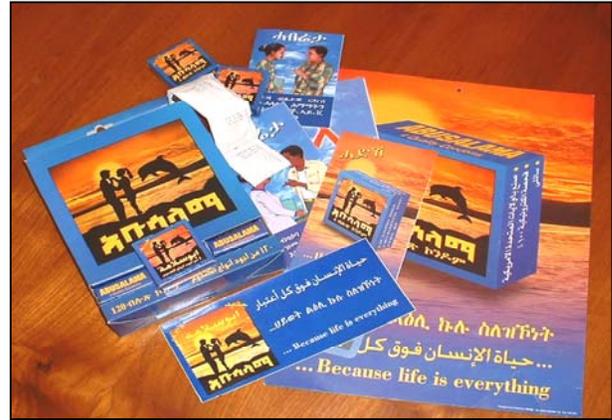
- Conducting a military-focused Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) campaign,
- Increasing access to condoms for military personnel,
- Enhancing the capacity of the EDF to maintain HIV prevention, and
- Documenting lessons learned and disseminating best practices.

The first objective was accomplished through a culturally relevant feature film *Faces of AIDS* that was shown to EDF personnel via mobile video units at garrisons throughout the country. Print media used in the awareness campaign included brochures,



Troops in the field were trained using a mobile video unit.

articles in newspapers and other periodicals, and advertisements in a military publication. To complement their social marketing campaign, PSI and EDF trained peer educators from each battalion to conduct HIV/AIDS prevention workshops.



DHAPP funded promotional materials for social marketing of condoms, sold in areas frequented by EDF troops.

Clinical Provider Training

A University of California, San Diego (UCSD) Medical Center senior laboratory technician accompanied 3 physicians from the US Air Force to conduct a needs assessment with EDF personnel in November 2002. The delegation discovered that an Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay (ELISA) machine for performing HIV testing was available but had not been removed from its crating. The following summarizes other observations and recommendations:

1. Lack of expertise and infrastructure hampers the EDF ability to safely deploy antiretroviral therapy and utilize state-of-the-art laboratory technologies for diagnosis and monitoring of treatment efficacy and toxicity.
2. Basic laboratory capabilities are available (e.g. complete blood cell with differential count/total lymphocyte count, blood chemistries, liver enzymes, urine testing, and selected serology including rapid HIV testing).

3. ELISA testing may be feasible for EDF if partnership with Ministry of Health can be encouraged and strengthened.
4. Flow cytometry (CD4 T-cell subset analysis) and PCR for HIV viral load testing seem unlikely to be successful prior to laboratory training, staffing and infrastructure development.
5. Purchase ELISA washer/reader and expendable supplies for EDF on a pilot program basis in Asmara, with option for further machines based on successful implementation and utilization of first machine.
6. Assist the EDF in education regarding infection control, and supply the needed materials (masks, face shields).
7. Encourage laboratory capacity building as a step toward improved diagnosis of opportunistic infections and as a foundation to support future antiretroviral therapy.



US Air Force physicians supervised laboratory technicians at the Eritrean Ministry of Defense Health Services in operation of an ELISA machine.

Interoperability

DHAPP facilitated liaison between the EDF and the following organizations: The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Family Health International (FHI) and the United States

Agency for International Development (USAID) via Population Services International (PSI).

PROGRAM IMPACT

Master Trainers and Peer Educators

DHAPP sponsored training for 120 HIV prevention master trainers and 430 HIV peer educators.



EDF troops received peer education training in HIV/AIDS prevention from a DHAPP subcontractor.

Number of Troops Trained

Over 225,000 troops have been trained in STI/HIV/AIDS prevention. All EDF nurses, nurse assistants and paramedics received training on universal precautions against HIV/AIDS in occupational settings.

Potential Number of Troops Affected

DHAPP funds sponsored HIV/AIDS prevention training programs that can reach 300,000 troops.



DHAPP sponsored condom vending machines in Sawa barracks, Eritrea's largest military training camp.

Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT)

Five VCT centers have been established and 8 counselors have been trained. Demand for VCT services increased substantially subsequent to the HIV awareness campaign.

Laboratory Capability/Infrastructure

Four laboratory technicians were trained to operate ELISA equipment during the UCSD and US Air Force delegation visit to Eritrea in November 2002. In addition, a DHAPP logistician procured and arranged for the installation and networking of 4 desktop computers to a wireless local area network at the Ministry of Defense Health Services Unit, Asmara, Eritrea, in December 2002.



Wireless Internet receiver was installed at Ministry of Defense Health Unit, Asmara, Eritrea

Mass Awareness

Two films were produced with DHAPP support. These were shown in 150 presentations via use of a mobile video unit. Drama troupes staged 15 plays around the country with powerful messages about HIV/AIDS.

Posters, stickers, and pocket calendars with HIV/AIDS prevention messages were printed and distributed to all EDF units. This massive effort with print media reached an estimated 300,000 people. Additionally, 180 educational HIV/AIDS awareness seminars were conducted with a total of 225,000 Eritrean military personnel. The seminars were conducted in two phases: Phase 1 targeted senior military, and Phase 2 targeted junior personnel.



US Air Force physicians visited a manufacturing plant for condom pouches, which became part of the official uniform for EDF personnel.