

# HIV & AIDS IN ARMED FORCES

By  
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World Aids Day this year was the 10th, which shows how new this disease is;

The theme was "Children living in a world with AIDS"

UN Secretary General said in his statement;

- World AIDS Day is both a solemn observance and a call to action
- it is a day on which we remember the millions of individuals - our friends and family members, public figures and the little known who have died since the epidemic began.
- it is day of solidarity with the 30 million people around the world who are living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- and it is a day on which we renew our commitment to helping individuals and nations prevent HIV transmission and alleviate the devastating impact of this epidemic.
- children may be vulnerable, but they are neither helpless or beyond help. Children are themselves are effective communicators, not only among their peers but within their families. Indeed education and information are amongst our most powerful weapons in the fight against AIDS.

While "children living with Aids" was the theme of World AIDS Day this year, there are a number of issues that should concern you as military personnel today;

- transmission of the HIV virus is preventable, but requires change in behaviour.
  - change in behaviour requires information, understanding and awareness of how AIDS is transmitted and what can be done to prevent its transmission.
  - encouragement and examples of good behaviour.
    - At a UN General Assembly session two or three years ago one of the speakers said it is as simple as ABC
    - A abstain
    - B be faithful..have only one partner.. do not sleep around, play around or what you say it in Nepal.
    - C condoms.. use condoms for safe sex, if you cannot manage A and B...
- Recognition of how AIDS might affect your work as any Army;
  - denial has been one of the biggest barriers to prevention of AIDS in any community. We must accept the realities.
  - army wives are at risk when there husbands have unsafe sex with the commercial sex workers that always appear wherever Armies are based.
  - men do have sex with other men in any all-male situation in which men are working together and their are no women available for sex, and I am told that the Nepalese army

is no exception.

- So "SAFE SEX FOR EVERYONE" must be the message
  - army children are at risk in the same way as children in the normal population are.
  - the army itself is at risk if it does not prevent AIDS within its ranks.
  - its provision of health services to its community could be overwhelmed if we do not prevent AIDS taking hold in Nepal.
  - safe blood, contamination of work environments and patient care
  - availability of recruits if the 16-25 year age group becomes devastated by this disease.
  - let me share some quotes to amplify your concern;
1. Military and civilian leaders met in Berlin in June of 1993 at the same time as the 9th International Conference on AIDS. The meeting reported that since the AIDS epidemic both erodes the economic well-being of severely affected countries and at the same time saps their military strength and stability.
  2. "Armed Forces: Both High Risk Group and untapped Resource" Journal of the International Association of Physicians in AIDS Care July 9, 1996 Gordon Nary, Editor.

Armed forces personnel are at higher risk of HIV infection than the population at large, according to the Stuart Kingma, chair of the Civil-Military Alliance to Combat HIV and AIDS. Multiple factors have contributed to elevated seroprevalence rates on a global level among members of the military. Among these are:

A high percentage of the population is in the 15-24 year age group. Sexually transmitted disease (STD) infection rates in the military are 2.5 times higher than the norm. STD rates are much higher in war and during troop deployment, occasionally as much as 100 percent higher. There is a consistent presence of sex workers and drugs where troops are located.

Lydia Temoshok of the World Health Organization presented disturbing data from the US military: During the six months prior to Temoshok's study, 43% of HIV-infected servicemen surveyed reported having at least one HIV-negative sexual partner and not always using a condom during vaginal or anal sex.

In Cameroon, HIV seroprevalence rates, in 1994, were at a relatively low 3.2% for the general population, but 6.3% for the military. Mpoudi Ngolle Eitel, Service de lutte contre le SIDA, lamented that "Some soldiers still do not believe in the existence of AIDS," Eitel utilizes compulsory courses in STD prevention, weekly radio programs on STD/AIDS, and use of peer educators to further HIV/AIDS education.

Although higher seroprevalence rates make armed forces personnel a problematic population, Major Rubaramira Ruranga of the Joint Clinical Research Center, Kampala, Uganda, pointed out ways in which the military is a largely untapped resource that can be actively used to prevent HIV infection.

Ruranga noted that members of the military are readily accessible for training and networking. The Vietnamese military, for example has a high sense of self preservation, which can be used to promote prevention efforts. In Uganda, the military forms a quasi-elite population. Ruranga suggests that members of this military "elite" should be, at the time of their discharge, trained peer educators enabled to bring prevention messages back to their families and communities. Ruranga is living with HIV and supports testing efforts in Uganda. He remarked, "any good commander would never take his forces anywhere without first doing reconnaissance. In Uganda, where we are all vulnerable, we need to take reconnaissance of our own bodies by taking an HIV test."

3. TIME magazine had reported in a small story that the HIV-positive prevalence rates among some armies in central Africa were as high as 50 to 75 percent, posing a serious problem for their governments. (TIME, 1993). A report of the defense oriented Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, D.C. found.

There are potential security implications due to the fact that the increase in HIV-infected military personnel is gradually weakening the capacity of militaries to defend their nations and maintain civil order, to provide qualified personnel for overseas training, and to have access to a healthy conscription pool (Center for Strategic and International Studies [CSIS],1993,p.3)

In addressing the HIV/AIDS issue in the Army, I suggest you learn from what others are doing. I give two examples.

- the SAFALATAM campaign launched yesterday with its theme “know AIDS so that there will be no AIDS”. Its purpose is to promote discussion, doing so indirectly in a culture and a community which is not used to talking about sex. (that reluctance has been overcome in other countries, as people have realize the urgency of having a community that knows all about AIDS and how to prevent it. We know that education works.
- another example is film released on Monday evening.

In closing, I would like to say two thing,;

Let us unite to work together to prevent the further spread of AIDS and protect Nepal’s people from this terrible “time bomb” that will have such a devastating effect on our economy. on our people, on our lives.

Let us remember the story of the woman with aids, and the wise priest in Thailand;

The priest was approach by the woman  
she had been a prostitute, or a commercial sex worker  
she said “ I come to seek forgiveness”

He replied

“It is we who should seek your forgiveness. We have let the world become one in which people like you get AIDS”.