

Influx of Foreigners Sparks AIDS Alert

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Fears that HIV may be spreading prompts the authorities to investigate scale of infection.

The large influx of outsiders recently coming into Iraq has prompted health officials to conduct a comprehensive survey to evaluate the HIV infection rate in the country.

During the Saddam Hussein regime, Iraq was a relatively closed society, with few foreign companies and workers. But since the fall of the regime, the country has opened its borders to foreign investment, aid organisations and others.

As a result, the ministry of health is looking at a 4 billion US dollar long-term budget to ensure AIDS does not become an epidemic in Iraq, said Haider al-Shimari, director of the blood bank at Medical City hospital in Baghdad.

Iraqi health officials said HIV appeared in Iraq through a tainted blood supply received in 1983 from France, which was meant for haemophiliacs. About 244 people were infected with AIDS and 44 were still alive when the former regime was ousted. Since then, 18 new cases of HIV have been reported, creating a total of 62.

"The new cases are dangerous in spite of their small number," said Wadhah Hamid Abood, director of the Centre of Studies and Research. "Compared to the era of the former regime, the number is high although Iraq is considered a country with a low number of AIDS cases."

As part of the government's AIDS prevention efforts, programmes have been set up to test donated blood, the blood of couples planning to marry, patients with tuberculosis, pregnant women, patients who have sexually transmitted diseases, visitors to Iraq and prisoners.

Starting this year, the government began providing free health care and financial help to AIDS patients, giving 50,000 dinars (34 dollars) per month for living expenses and 100,000 dinars annually for clothes.

Last week, the Council of Ministers issued a decree to increase the monthly stipend to 200 dollars, said Qasim Allawi, media manager at the ministry of health.

The ministry now provides condoms for free, shelters AIDS patients who are homeless and set up a centre to provide information about the virus. It plans to build 17 such centres.

Under the past regime, many people with the disease were burned alive for fear of infecting others.

One AIDS patient, who declined to give his full name, said he was not allowed to talk about his condition under the Saddam government. He had been infected by a blood transfusion.

"In the past, I was forced to sign papers in which I pledged not to talk about being infected with AIDS and they threatened to execute me if I didn't," he said.

Still, he complained that the current government is not doing enough for him and other AIDS patients in terms of providing medicine and other treatment.

Some health organisations fear that the collapse of the health care system and the opening of Iraq's borders may lead to an increase in the HIV infection rate.

That's why groups like the Iraqi Red Crescent Society is also providing financial help to AIDS victims and supporting HIV prevention projects, said Saeed Ismail Haqi, head of the society.

"We will participate in any project that works on limiting AIDS, whether it's proposed by the ministry of health or any other party," said Haqi.

Yaseen al-Rubai'I is an IWPR trainee in Baghdad.

Location: [Iraqi Kurdistan](#)
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