CIA says Africa's AIDS epidemic is a "national security" issue

By Barry Mason
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A recent speech by US President Bill Clinton indicates that the major powers are increasingly approaching the AIDS crisis in Africa, Asia and the former Soviet Union as a security issue, rather than a public health problem to be tackled by curative and preventative measures.

Clinton raised the subject during his European visit in May, warning, “These diseases can ruin economies and threaten the very survival of societies.”

In April, White House spokesman Jim Kennedy said that AIDS “more than a legitimate ongoing health threat, also has the potential to destabilise governments such as African or Asian nations, which make it an international security issue.”

Kennedy’s remarks followed a CIA report published in January—the first time that the security agency has intervened in a health question. Entitled "The Global Infectious Disease Threat and its Implications for the United States", the report is billed as an "important initiative on the part of the Intelligence Community to consider the national security dimension of a non-traditional threat”. In its key judgements the report states, "new and re-emerging infectious diseases will pose a rising global health threat and will complicate US and global security over the next 20 years."

The report continues: "These diseases will endanger US citizens at home and abroad, threaten US armed forces deployed overseas, and exacerbate social and political instability in key countries and regions in which the United States has significant interests.”

The CIA considers HIV/AIDS to be the greatest threat, estimating that by 2020 it will be responsible for over half of all deaths from infectious disease in the developing world. HIV presents a threat in both the former Soviet Union and Asia, but sub-Saharan Africa is the most vulnerable region, the report states. With around 10 percent of the world's population, this area accounts for half of all deaths from infectious diseases, primarily malaria and HIV/AIDS.

The report forecasts a further deterioration in sub-Saharan Africa as a result of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. The first decade of the new century will see a population decline due to a rising death rate and worsening social conditions in the region. “Persistent poverty [will sustain] the least developed countries as reservoirs of infection,” the report states.

The CIA’s concern is the impact that this human tragedy will have on US imperialism's interests. One major worry is the risk of infection for US troops “deployed in support of humanitarian and peacekeeping operations in developing countries”.

Also with regard to sub-Saharan Africa, the report notes that “the relationship between disease and political instability is indirect but real.... The severe social and economic impact of infectious diseases is likely to intensify the struggle for political power to control scarce state resources.”

The CIA report raises the possibility of frictions arising between the US and developing countries as a result of the application of trade embargoes and travel and immigration restrictions. The US may embark on such policies to isolate it from the impact of infectious epidemics.

The report suggests that health-related "security" concerns could become a pretext for new imperialist adventures in Africa. Military intervention could be justified, for example, on the grounds of preventing the spread of diseases beyond Africa's borders.

The report also underscores the inadequate offers of assistance to African countries by the drug corporations. Five major drug companies, Glaxo Wellcome, Boehringer Ingelheim, Bristol-Myers...
Squibb, Merck and Roche recently announced they would cut the price of combination therapy anti-AIDS drugs. Glaxo Wellcome said drug charges would be cut to around $2 a day. Even at these prices however, the drugs remain out of reach of the vast majority of HIV/AIDS sufferers in Africa. The annual per capita health budget in most African countries is $10 or less.

James Cochrane, director of Glaxo's international division, admitted as much. “Even at 10 cents a day, many African governments can't afford it, so at $2 a day, there's no way,” he said.

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