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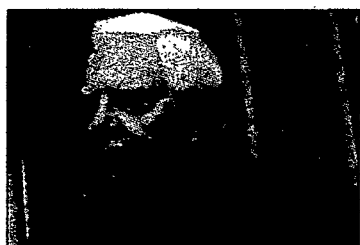
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AIDS devastates Africa

WASHINGTON — Food, education and AIDS-fighting drugs are the three top needs of the millions in sub-Saharan Africa afflicted with AIDS, according to Stephen Lewis, the special envoy of U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan for the HIV/AIDS situation in Africa.

Lewis spoke during an October meeting of the HIV/AIDS strategy group of the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance, an international group of participating churches and church-related agencies promoting study and action on HIV/AIDS, among other issues.

There are 28 million people with AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, and the toll from the disease will only get worse, Lewis predicted.

EFFECT ON WOMEN

Of those 28 million people, 15 million, or 53 percent, are women. But in the 15-24 age group, Lewis said, 67 percent are female.

Lewis blamed the "predatory sexual behavior of adult males" for the ballooning AIDS numbers among women.

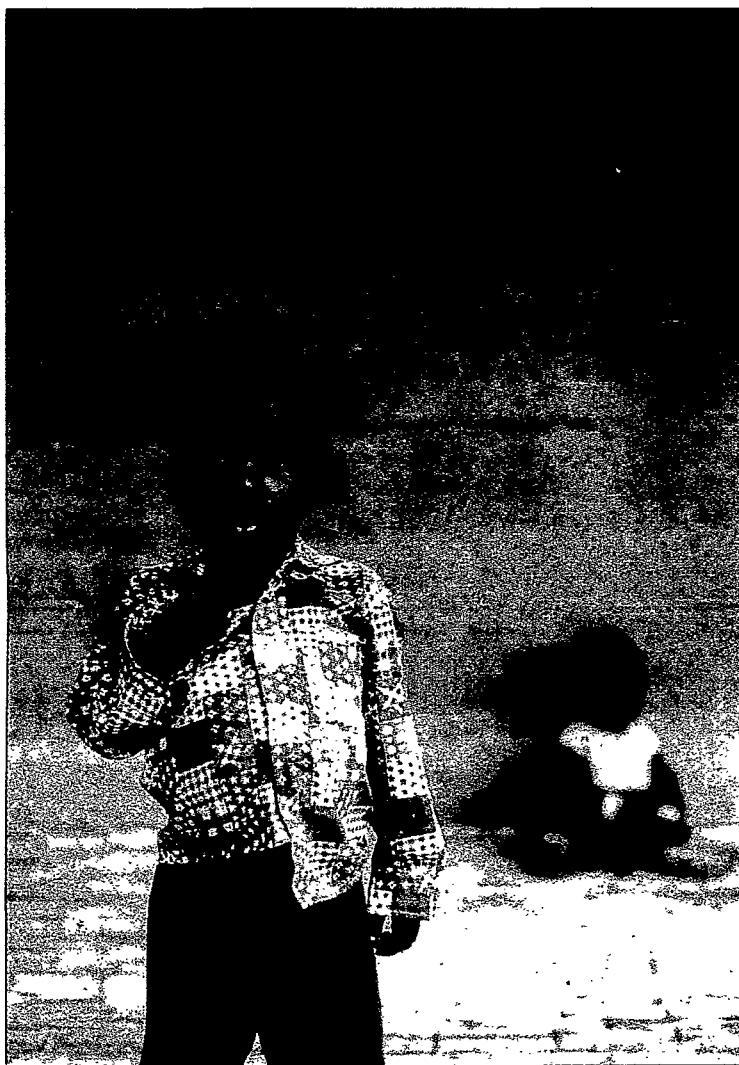
He said that at one hospital he visited in Tanzania in late September, 11 of the 13 AIDS sufferers were women.

In Malawi, a number of societal factors have hindered the fight against AIDS and placed women at great risk of the disease, said Abbie Shawa, program director for Catholic Relief Services in Malawi.

For instance, premarital sex is considered a test of manhood for Malawian men. As an initiation into adult life, young men are expected to sleep with a young girl, Shawa said.

Another common practice is property grabbing, in which relatives take whatever property is left behind by a deceased male relative, Shawa said. The widows, left without resources to care for their families, sometimes turn to prostitution to survive.

And in some southern areas of Malawi, a practice on the eve of a man's funeral also places women at risk. In this practice, an anonymous man enters a widow's bedroom the night before burial and has sex with the widow. The act is seen as a cleansing rit-



Two boys orphaned because of AIDS live at the Twapia facility in the town of Ndola in Zambia. The country will likely have the largest orphan population in sub-Saharan African by 2010.

ual and is repeated a few days after burial. The woman has no choice in her participation or in choosing her partner, Shawa said.

Franciscan Father Michael Perry, Africa policy adviser for the U.S. bishops' Office of International Justice and Peace, visited Zambia in late October as part of a U.S. church delegation. He said the impact of AIDS there has been devastating, with as many as 30 percent of adults in Zambia being diagnosed as HIV-positive.

Father Joe Komakoma, director of the Zambian bishops' Center for Justice, Development and Peace, said that in Zambia, "as in most cultures, women are taught to be submissive to men, and so there is no cultural basis on which women can challenge their husbands" if they are HIV-positive.

Older men often seek out younger girls for sex "presuming that they are HIV-free," he said.

FAMINE WOES

The AIDS situation in Africa is made worse by continuing drought and the specter of famine. Lewis said 14.4 million citizens in six African nations are at risk of starvation.

He said the famine "was probably a famine caused by AIDS" because of a "decimation of its most productive citizens ages 15-49." He added that "the people — the women, especially — are so weak they don't have the capacity" for farming activities.

Shawa noted that in Malawi, AIDS has decreased production in the agricultural sector, which accounts for 86 percent of the country's labor force. He said AIDS patients there, particularly in rural areas, often do not have adequate nutrition due to food shortages.

Food security is one of the basic needs CRS can provide for the people of Malawi, Shawa said, noting that CRS would be expanding its home-based care programs into the dioceses of Mangochi and Zomba in Malawi next year. One of the main responsibilities for home-based care volunteers is to provide food,

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Story and photos by Catholic News Service

