

and advertising space to the issue, supporting efforts to train reporters and the development and broadcasting of AIDS-related shows and films. Many broadcasters reported that they had already stepped up their AIDS coverage in recent years.

Award-winning TV dramas like MTV's "Staying Alive" and "Angels in America", a two-part television series based on a Broadway drama about AIDS in New York in the 1980s, have played a vital role in giving the disease a human face, participants said.

In India where some HIV/AIDS patients are stigmatized, Detective Vijay, the main character in a popular crime series, is an HIV-positive private investigator.

South Africa's version of the US children's show, "Sesame Street" — "Takali Sesame" — recently introduced an HIV-positive Muppet called Kami to encourage children to play with school friends who have HIV.

Peter Matlare, Chief Executive of the South African Broadcasting Company, said his network had set up an AIDS helpline called "Love Life" and that 250 000 young South Africans call in every month.

Many broadcasters said respected and popular personalities from sport, entertainment and politics were a powerful tool for communicating the dangers of unsafe sex.

"Who would think we would have Nelson Mandela speaking to our audience on ... condom usage?" MTV chief, Bill Roedy, said.

The president of China Central Television, Zhao Huayong, said a news report showing a Chinese minister shaking hands with an AIDS patient had been groundbreaking in raising awareness about the epidemic in China where few programmes had broached the subject in the past.

Mark Byford, Executive Director General of the BBC, said he had stepped up AIDS coverage on BBC World radio and television massively last year because AIDS was "a global story."

"It's not just about southern Africa. It's Russia, it's the Caribbean, it's China, it's Europe, it's everywhere," Byford said.

In response to Annan's appeal to make HIV/AIDS related material accessible to other media outlets, participants agreed to share footage and information rights-free possibly in the form of a

database. All 20 media networks signed a statement of support and their efforts will be reviewed at an international AIDS conference in Bangkok in July. ■

Fiona Fleck, *Geneva*

In brief

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This month sees the introduction of an additional *News* section. The objective of *In brief* is to provide readers with short summaries of developments, events or debates in the field of public health that do not merit in-depth reporting but are nevertheless important. We hope that this will help make the *News* a more comprehensive service for *Bulletin* readers.

European centre for disease control

European Union governments are soon to give their formal approval for a European centre for disease prevention and control. The initiative was given the go-ahead by the European parliament on 10 February.

The centre, which aims to be operating by early 2005, will be based in Sweden and will comprise a core staff of some 30 to 40 officials. It will be managed by representatives from national governments and European Union institutions with an initial three-year budget of US\$ 61 million.

The centre will become responsible for the management of the European communicable disease network and will be closely involved in the work of the EU health security task force which plans against bio-terrorist attacks.

One of its immediate tasks will be to establish a clear working relationship with WHO. The case for a European centre for disease control was argued by Michel Tibayrenc in the *Bulletin* (2001;79:1094). ■

Yellow fever emergency in Liberia

Three people with confirmed cases and two with suspected cases of yellow fever have died in Liberia prompting the launch of an emergency mass vaccination campaign.

WHO and UNICEF will launch the campaign together with Liberia's Ministry of Health and Social Welfare.

"Conditions are ripe here for an epidemic," said Dr Luzito Simao, of the WHO office in Liberia. "The last 14 years of civil war have literally destroyed Liberia's health infrastructure and yellow fever is an extremely deadly disease. Even among hospitalized patients, the mortality rate may reach up to 50%," he said, explaining that WHO considers just one laboratory confirmed case to be an outbreak.

UNICEF warned that 522 000 people were in need of urgent vaccination but there were only 80 000 vaccination doses available. Both agencies are appealing for US\$ 1.3 million to prevent the outbreak from spreading into the population at large.

With the onset of the rainy season, environmental conditions are set to become even more favourable for the disease. ■

Humanitarian crisis in Sudan

The recent escalation of violence in Darfur, western Sudan, has led to a humanitarian crisis with thousands of people fleeing into the desert. Three million people remain beyond the reach of aid. Lack of access to food, water and medical facilities is threatening the survival of many, report Médecins Sans Frontières and the UN World Food Programme.

The crisis follows the breakdown of peace talks in mid-December. The ensuing deterioration of security and collapse of law have prevented agencies from operating in the province — one of the most inhospitable regions in the world. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, access to most areas outside the region's three state capitals — Nyala, El Geneina and El Fasher — is impaired by daily incidents of militarized violence on major roads and routes. The prevalence of landmines is also complicating efforts to deliver aid.

UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, Jan Egeland, praised the delivery of aid to the region but warned that aid workers "are still not reaching the majority of those in need."

The UN World Food Programme (WFP), which began an airlift of 500 metric tonnes of sorghum into the region in mid-February, described the situation for displaced people in the