



International
Rescue
Committee

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HIV/AIDS AND PEOPLE FLEEING ARMED CONFLICT

Like all sexually transmitted infections, the AIDS virus spreads faster when communities are in turmoil, and thus the disease has taken a significant toll on refugees and internally displaced persons fleeing wars. As part of its global health programs, the International Rescue Committee is working to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS in communities uprooted or affected by armed conflict.

Basic facts surrounding HIV/AIDS and armed conflicts:

- Many of the countries most affected by HIV/AIDS are currently at war or are hosting large numbers of mobile populations such as refugees and internally displaced people.
- People in conflict settings face increased vulnerability to HIV transmission because of the rise in sexual violence, the need to sell sex in exchange for food or money, the increased use of illicit drugs, and unsafe blood transfusion at a time of greater need – all of which may result from the breakdown of family life, social norms and health services.
- There is epidemiological evidence that HIV infection negatively affect the ability of individuals to survive the stress brought about by conflict. Infected people are at increased risk of other infectious diseases and malnutrition, the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in conflict.
- In a situation of conflict or general poverty, the epidemic reduces food security through illness and death, while at the same time forcing people to adopt risky strategies, such as sex work, in order to survive, further spreading the virus.
- The disease impacts poor countries with low levels of education and a small professional class. As people responsible for social maintenance functions die, entire political and social structures may collapse, triggering new wars.
- Rising levels of poverty coupled with increasing weakness of the state also produce greater incentive and opportunity for political violence, as challengers seek to replace those in power or embrace political radicalism. AIDS-induced poverty also increases the risk of ethnic violence as groups blame others and scapegoat minorities for the increasing deprivation.

The good news is there is evidence to suggest that improved protection, health, education, and social services for displaced populations in organized camp settings lowers transmission.

The IRC believes the international community should increase efforts to:

- Provide refugees and internally displaced people with preventive measures as well as high-quality healthcare in situations of armed conflict; and
- Increase the availability of antiretroviral drugs for infected persons, including refugees and displaced people; and
- Increase pressure on governments obstructing aid to marginalized and displaced populations, including those suffering from HIV/AIDS, to allow unhindered access to these communities.



The International Rescue Committee's HIV/AIDS Programs

HIV/AIDS-control is an integral part of all the International Rescue Committee's health programs, with preventive and curative assistance for victims fleeing violent conflict all over the world.

Primary activities include:

Prevention - A crucial part of all IRC health programs, the IRC undertakes HIV prevention activities through awareness-raising campaigns, youth peer-education networks, counseling on safe-sex practices by health care professionals, distribution of condoms, and blood screening programs to ensure safe blood transfusions. The IRC also builds local capacity to conduct laboratory tests and to provide high quality health services.

Medical Assistance - Health care is the IRC's largest assistance sector, with programs in over 20 countries and territories throughout Africa, Asia and Europe. HIV/AIDS-related assistance includes medical and psycho-social care for HIV/AIDS sufferers and the distribution of antiretroviral drugs to prevent transmission of the virus from an infected mother to her baby. To further ensure high-quality assistance, the IRC has developed a field manual entitled "Protecting the Future", the first publication designed specifically for health workers developing comprehensive HIV-programs among displaced and war-affected populations. A downloadable version of the manual is available at the IRC's web site (www.theirc.org.)

Advocacy - Through participation at international conferences, meetings with donors and advocacy in the field, the IRC aims to bring attention to the particular vulnerability of refugees and internally displaced persons to HIV/AIDS. The IRC works and cooperates with all actors seeking to prevent and assist in the area of HIV/AIDS. This includes both governmental and non-governmental actors in the field as well as inter-governmental organizations and United Nations agencies. The IRC is part of the Consortium on Aids and Mobility, a group of non-governmental organizations, UN agencies and academic institutions that are rallying around the specific problems surrounding AIDS and populations who migrate.

Founded in 1933, the International Rescue Committee is a global leader in relief, rehabilitation, protection, post-conflict development and resettlement services for refugees and other populations uprooted or affected by persecution or violent conflict. The IRC has responded to health crises in conflict-affected countries around the world, including Cambodia, Afghanistan, Mozambique, Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda. Today, health care is the IRC's largest sector, with programs in over 20 countries and territories throughout Africa, Asia and Europe.

For more information about IRC's work in the area of HIV/AIDS, visit www.theirc.org or contact:

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