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African scientists join colleagues in affirming HIV's role in AIDS...

AP

Michael Cherry, Johannesburg

About 400 independent African scientists, including the health minister of Swaziland, Phetsile Dlamini, are among those who have signed an international declaration stating that HIV causes AIDS. The document also condemns revisionist theories that the virus is not the cause of the disease.

More than 5,000 scientists and physicians worldwide — none of whom are employees of pharmaceutical companies — have signed what is being called the Durban Declaration (see page 15). It is being issued on the eve of the 13th international AIDS conference, which starts in Durban on Sunday.

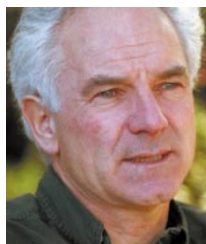
The declaration, organized by a 266-member committee, states that the evidence that AIDS is caused by HIV is “clear-cut, exhaustive and unambiguous”. It adds: “It is unfortunate that a few vocal people continue to deny the evidence. This position will cost countless lives.”

Dissident scientists sitting on the advisory panel set up by President Thabo Mbeki to address the nature of AIDS and its links to HIV (see *Nature* 405, 105; 2000) have criticized fellow panel members who signed the declaration. The dissidents claimed that the signatories, including Malegapuru Makgoba, president of South Africa's Medical Research Council (MRC), were prejudging the issues being considered by the panel.

But South African minister of health, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, effectively neutralized the possibility of the dissidents using the panel as a forum to oppose the declaration. Speaking at the opening of a two-day meeting of the panel in Johannesburg earlier this week (see right), she declared: “We uphold the right of every scientist to append their signatures to a document which articulates a scientific point of view to which they subscribe.”

Prominent dissident Peter Duesberg, professor of molecular biology at the University of California at Berkeley and a member of a four-person task force set up by the Mbeki panel to design experiments to test the link between HIV and AIDS, says that “scientific pogroms” are common.

“In this case, the majority has persuaded



Duesberg (left) dismisses ‘scientific pogrom’ but Tshabalala-Msimang is more conciliatory.



the world's oldest scientific journal to publish a declaration designed to intimidate scientific minorities from questioning a hypothesis that has yet to cure a single AIDS patient,” he said in Johannesburg this week.

But Makgoba points out that the declaration “is about the history and science of the HIV/AIDS epidemic from scientists who have direct experience in managing and researching it”.

Other panel members who have signed the declaration include Hoosen Coovadia, convener of the Durban conference; Helene Gayle of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia; Salim Karim, director of HIV prevention and vaccine research for South Africa's MRC; and

physicians James McIntyre and Glenda Gray of the Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg.

Makgoba describes the attempt to make the presidential advisory panel a platform for the dissidents to respond to the declaration as “opportunism”. He adds that “the crunch has come for them, as experimental evidence in support of their view is being demanded of them — something they have never been able to supply”.

Parks Mankahlana, Mbeki's spokesperson, commented to the Johannesburg newspaper *The Star* that the president “respects the rights of people to issue declarations and publish them, but we must be careful that we don't turn the Durban conference into an Mbeki-bashing bazaar”.

In an interview published in the *Sunday Independent* last weekend, three South African cabinet ministers — including Tshabalala-Msimang and arts, culture, science and technology minister Ben Ngubane — defended Mbeki against accusations that his discussions with scientists disputing the link between HIV and AIDS implied that he himself denied the connection. “Simply put, the president has never stated that HIV does not cause AIDS,” the ministers said. ■

...but advisory panel remains divided

Five days before the start of the 13th international AIDS conference in Durban on Sunday, an advisory panel on AIDS set up by South African President Thabo Mbeki met there amid optimism that the government might be prepared to modify its position.

The enlargement of the panel from 36 members to 50, with the new members largely comprising mainstream South African and Ugandan AIDS researchers, has led to speculation that the South African government might be about to review its policy on AIDS.

The non-dissident panel

members are drawing up a proposed government policy on the prevention and treatment of AIDS.

Members of the dissident and non-dissident camps on the panel are believed to have worked largely independently of each other. The dissident faction has continued to argue for policies based on their claims that AIDS is not contagious and not sexually transmitted.

But further evidence that HIV causes AIDS came from a study by panellists James McIntyre and Glenda Gray on a cohort of babies born to HIV-positive mothers in the township of Soweto who were

not treated with antiretroviral drugs. Infant mortality rates after one year were 17/1,000 in babies who were HIV negative after delivery, compared with 326/1,000 in those who were HIV positive.

As *Nature* went to press, there seemed little chance of a consensus emerging between the dissident and non-dissident panellists. National Research Foundation president Khotso Mokhele, as head of the panel's secretariat, is faced with the task of compiling a report for Mbeki before his opening address to the Durban meeting. ■

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