

Algeria to tackle HIV/AIDS

Research centre a first for North Africa.

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Algeria will partner with the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) to build the first HIV/AIDS research centre in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

The centre, which should be operational by 2013, will be based in the city of Tamanrasset in southern Algeria. It will bring together researchers from Africa, Europe and the United States working on treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS.

"The work of the centre will be essential to fight HIV/AIDS in this region of the world," says Adel Zeddani, UNAIDS coordinator in Algeria.

During the centre's launch last month in Algiers, Djamel Ould Abbès, health minister of Algeria, said "the centre will try to attract the best researchers working on prevention and treatment and will focus on robust exchange of information and collaborative research."

Michel Sidibé, executive director of UNAIDS, says the Algerian government has pledged to fund the whole project except for the salaries of the researchers, for which UNAIDS will be responsible. Tamanrasset was selected as the location for the centre because it lies close to Algeria's southern borders, through which people from 48 different African nationalities pass during immigration through Algeria to Europe.

Numbers growing

While HIV prevalence in MENA remains comparatively low, according to the UNAIDS regional report on HIV/AIDS in MENA in 2011, the region has the second fastest growing incidence of HIV/AIDS, only surpassed by Eastern Europe and Central Asia. The estimated number of adults and children living with HIV in the region increased from 330,000 in 2001 to 580,000 in 2010. According to a World Bank report on HIV/AIDS released in 2010, this increase is mainly concentrated in high risk groups.

In recent years, Algeria has stepped up its HIV/AIDS prevention programme. Antiretroviral drugs are available free in 60 centres across the country. However, according to the Institut Pasteur in Algeria, the number of new infections continues to rise, going from 600 in 2010 to 700 in 2011, estimating around 5,500 people living with HIV/AIDS. Othman Bourouba, director of AIDS Algeria, a local NGO that supports people living with HIV/AIDS, says that number could be as high as 20,000.

Many infected people refuse testing or antiretroviral drugs due to stigmatization in Algeria and the rest of the Arab world.

"The Tamanrasset centre will be useful in addressing the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS," says Bourouba. "Besides the scientific research conducted there, they will gather important information about the spread of the disease in Algeria and the region. With more accurate data we will be better positioned to fight the virus."

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