

Wednesday, May 23, 2007

Gambian leader playing with fire on pandemic

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Special to The Kansas City Star

Gambian President Yahya Jammeh is exploiting the scourge of HIV/AIDS in his country to apparently bolster his waning political grip.

Jammeh, who is emerging as a no-nonsense dictator in West Africa, early in the year rattled many scientists and medical personnel when he claimed he had discovered a cure for HIV/AIDS.

The Republic of Gambia is located in the western coast of Africa. Out of a population of 1.688 million, about 34,000 people, or 2 percent, are infected with HIV/AIDS.

Like most African countries, Gambia is fairly poor, and illiteracy and lack of knowledge ravage most rural folks.

Jammeh has ruled Gambia with an iron fist since 1994, when he declared himself the head of a military junta that overthrew the democratically elected government.

He says his “medicine” works fast “only on those whose infection has not advanced to full blown AIDS.” The concoction involves green herbal paste, bitter yellow liquid and eating bananas.

The president, who is not a medical practitioner, also encourages AIDS patients to disregard the scientifically approved anti-retroviral medications for his phony concoction of dirty herbs.

This should send alarm bells to global scientists and the World Health Organization to move in and avert a catastrophe of unspeakable proportions in Gambia, and probably Africa.

AIDS remains a global tragedy, and playing with its cure for apparent political survival is disastrous. Jammeh’s absurd claims might undermine the campaign against AIDS in his country.

The continent of Africa has been worst hit by the AIDS pandemic. Of 3 million AIDS deaths in 2006, almost 2 million were in Africa.

It is commendable to note that the U.S. Congress has approved billions of dollars to Africa and the Caribbean to combat the pandemic. In 2003 alone, America released \$15 billion to be spent in the poorest countries to fight AIDS. More billions were sent to the continent last year and this year for the same purpose.

Jammeh has conveniently avoided the press to clarify legitimate concerns expressed over the efficacy of his purported discovery. In March, CNN's Jeff Koinange pitched a tent in the capital, Banjul, in an effort to interview Jammeh, but the president avoided him.

A few months ago, a senior official with the United Nations who expressed doubts on the veracity of Jammeh's AIDS cure claims was deported from Banjul and declared persona non grata.

Politically skewed policies by some African leaders have compromised the war against AIDS. The president of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, is on record declaring that HIV does not cause AIDS.

Kenyan leaders, on the other hand, have spurred research in an attempt to find a real cure for the disease.

The people of Gambia are obviously vulnerable because of hopelessness and ignorance. This is why it is important for the medical fraternity and scientists from across the world to dispel these cheap but dangerous policies by Jammeh before incurable damage is done.