

Where scare tactics fail to halt Aids

Greater political will is required in Indonesia to overcome cultural, religious taboos in Aids fight

David Kennedy

IN THE far flung town of Marauke in the province of Papua, near Indonesia's eastern border with Papua New Guinea, a giant billboard shows a grotesque demon engulfed in hellfire and bearing the caption: "Be aware! HIV/Aids is evil. Send it to hell!"

Papua has the highest rate of HIV/Aids infection in Indonesia and some experts believe it is heading for a general epidemic. About five to 10 per cent of the 40,000 population of Marauke, is thought to be infected. However public awareness of the disease remains low.

"It's clear that people's basic knowledge of prevention is lacking," says Ms Helene Lorinquier from the medical relief agency Medecin Sans Frontieres (MSF), which has a team of doctors providing free testing and treatment at Marauke's district hospital.

"People even ask us if mosquitoes are transmitting Aids. But that's not only in Papua. If you talk to people in the streets of Jakarta you find a similar lack of knowledge."

While the recorded numbers of people with HIV/Aids in Indonesia is still considered low at about 4,000 cases, the World Health Organization estimates the actual number to be in the region of 130,000.

According to the National Aids Commission, the classification for the epidemic in Indonesia has been changed from "low prevalence" to a "concentrated epidemic", notably in areas with high rates of drug use or prostitution such as in Riau, the Indonesian province bordering Singapore.

Outreach programmes are

underway in Batam Island, a major draw for Indonesian sex workers attracted to the lucrative sex tourism market which is patronised by Singaporean men.

Aid workers in Indonesia place little faith in official figures as the overall numbers of people being tested for HIV/Aids is extremely low due to the stigma attached to the disease.

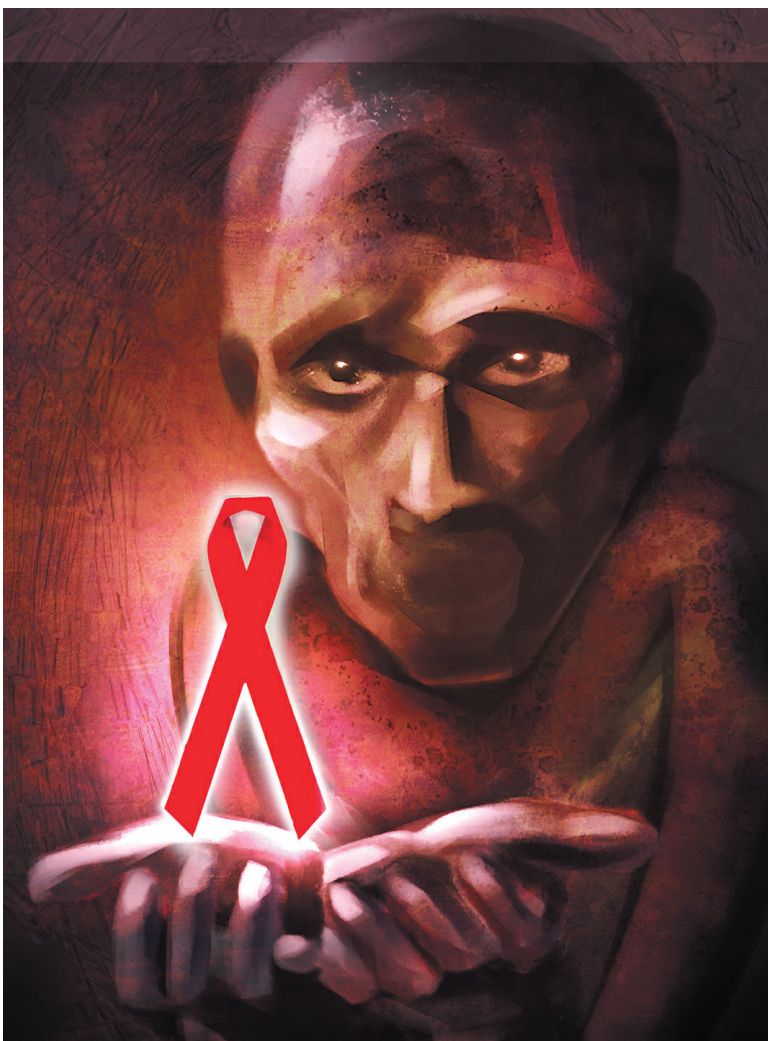
"There's still reluctance among people to be tested," says Dr Hudoyo, deputy director of Aksi Stop Aids, a government/non-governmental organisation partnership funded by the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, headquartered in Washington, DC, which provides about US\$8 million (\$13.8 million) per year to HIV/Aids programmes.

Cultural and religious taboos are also a problem but ways are being found to accommodate sensitivities.

"Last year there was a protest from certain vocal religious groups saying this was dangerous for public morality," says Dr Hudoyo referring to media campaigns which were stopped following objections from Muslim clerics concerned that they were promoting promiscuity.

"Now the approach has changed and our former minister for religious affairs, Mr Tarmizi Taher, appears on TV ads saying you have to be faithful and follow religious teachings — then the rest of the ad talks about condoms."

Dr Suharto, head of the National Aids Commission, believes there is no room for complacency. He is particularly critical of the lack of HIV/Aids education in schools.



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HIV/Aids: Indonesia fears an epidemic.

"We are trying to revitalise our national information campaign," he explains, adding that HIV/Aids prevention modules for schools were agreed in 1997 but the policy was never implemented.

Dr Suharto blames a lack of political will for the sluggish response to the public's need for information and he is not afraid of appearing partisan, saying: "If Jusuf Kalla became vice-president

we would have good access to the top level of government."

During his recent term in office as coordinating minister for people's welfare, Mr Jusuf Kalla, a leading vice-presidential candidate in Indonesia's forthcoming presidential election, was active in putting HIV/Aids back on the political agenda.

Famous for their political satire, traditional *dalang* puppet masters are also being trained to

incorporate HIV/Aids prevention messages into their popular *wayang* (shadow puppet) shows which travel around villages in the densely-populated island of Java. These shows have been highly successful in family planning information campaigns.

While they are unlikely to reach Marauke, where there is no shadow puppet tradition, clearly something more than scary billboards will be needed.

In the meantime, MSF medical aid workers are concerned about the low numbers coming forward for testing — only 70 so far — either because they are unaware they are infected or because they believe there is no treatment.

The government's pledge to subsidise costly anti-retroviral (ARVs) drugs for 5,000 patients in 25 hospitals across Indonesia by the end of the year is likely to encourage more people to come forward for testing.

Only last week about 1,500 new HIV cases were notified to ministry of health officials by Jakarta hospitals alone.

There is still a long way to go but identifying infected people early is essential in order to improve their chances of living with the disease.

"To treat people you need to identify them and to identify them you need to ensure they have some basic knowledge. For this you need to first reduce the stigmatisation," says Ms Lorinquier.

The writer is a freelance journalist based in Jakarta.

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