

## A Recipe for Instability

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, August 18, 2004

It sounds like a sinister plot cooked up by a villain in the latest Spiderman movie: A deadly epidemic breaks out in a country with a poorly protected arsenal of nuclear weapons. The country's already-fragile economic and political institutions are not prepared to deal with the crisis. State agencies fail, fueling social unrest and the possibility of internal conflict. Hundreds of thousands of children are orphaned as their parents die of the disease; left to grow up poor and disaffected, they become potential recruits for gangs, terrorist groups, and other rogue elements.

Frighteningly, we don't need a mythical villain to bring this disaster upon us. AIDS has already begun to ravage Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union. Some experts on the global crisis predict that within a few years, as many as one in five Russian adults could be infected. Most of those newly infected Russians are between 18 and 25, the prime ages for joining the military or the workforce—both of which are consequently being weakened by the spread of AIDS. The epidemic has also reached India and China, other nuclear powers with huge and impoverished populations.

We need to halt this epidemic for more than humanitarian reasons. The spread of AIDS, and its effects on societies and governments, threatens us here in the United States. As we have seen, from Afghanistan to Somalia to Haiti, failed states become breeding grounds for terrorists and tyrants, who step in to fill the power vacuum. When social systems collapse, the results can be catastrophic.

AIDS tears apart families, wrecks economies, and weakens governments. The CIA says infant mortality levels, which have skyrocketed in Africa, are one of the surest variables for predicting state failure. Instability wrought by AIDS can spread to neighboring afflicted countries.

That's why in 2000, the UN Security Council took the unprecedented step of declaring AIDS a threat to international peace and security. At the time, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said, "The impact of AIDS in Africa is no less destructive than that of warfare itself. By overwhelming the continent's health and social services, by creating millions of orphans, and by decimating health workers and teachers, AIDS is causing social and economic crises which in turn threaten political security. In already unstable

societies, this cocktail of disasters is a sure recipe for more conflict. And conflict, in turn, provides fertile ground for further infections.”

We’ve all heard about the plight of AIDS orphans in Africa, one of the most heartbreaking legacies of the epidemic. Yet orphans should do more than tug at our heartstrings, because the orphans of today become the desperate and volatile youth of tomorrow. According to the International Crisis Group, an organization that analyzes the causes of conflicts, young people with no job, no income, and no family to support them are at risk of joining, or being abducted by, local militias who replace the families they need. Lacking an independent moral compass, these child soldiers often commit the most heinous acts.

AIDS is especially prevalent among armed forces. In Africa, militaries may suffer infection rates five times greater than among civilians. Some African countries are worried that their vulnerability during an AIDS epidemic may trigger neighboring states (or internal insurgents) to seize upon their weakness and begin aggressions. This concern is also felt in Russia and India. Russia’s military, already enfeebled by its lack of resources, poor morale, and weak command structure, can hardly afford to suffer the physical devastation of AIDS.

Nor can Americans afford to discount the AIDS crisis looming beyond our borders. International instability—either due to war, epidemic, or both—affects us all. As former CIA Director George Tenet has explained, “AIDS in Africa basically takes generations out of play. And then you have refugee flows. And then you have economic disasters. And then you have civil wars that require ... some kind of involvement whether you choose to or not. And while we all believe we’re immune from all this, we’re not.”

Unfortunately, no Hollywood hero is going to swoop in to stop the epidemic. The United States and its allies need to massively bolster their funding of research, treatment, and prevention. We should finally treat AIDS as the weapon of mass destruction it is.

CORRECTION: The column "Moms on the margins: Your country needs you," sent out July 21, incorrectly stated the number of single women who didn't vote in the last election. The actual number for this group is 22 million.