

News bites

International

'Tighten our belts' – Rajat Gupta, chairman of Global Fund

Because of the economic downturn, the global fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria is running short of funds, global business and health leaders said at the beginning of February. Pledges to the fund from donor nations are running about R50 billion (\$5 billion) short of what is needed through 2010, Rajat Gupta, the chairman of the fund's board said in a conference call with reporters from Davos, Switzerland.

One of the last rounds of support for poor countries' disease-fighting programmes was postponed, another was cut by 10% and countries making requests were told to expect 25% cuts. 'I'm hopeful and confident that donors will continue to finance this,' Mr Gupta said, promising to scrutinise expenditures carefully and 'tighten our belts'.

However, Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University development economist and one of those joining him on the call, was more vehement. The poor were being refused R50 billion, he said angrily, while wealthy countries found R30 trillion (\$3 trillion) for bank bailouts and Wall Street bankers awarded themselves R180 billion (\$18 billion) in holiday bonuses while accepting those bailouts. 'This is absolutely in violation of the life and death pledges that the rich world made to the poor,' he said. 'I would suggest the administration reclaim those bonuses and put the money into the Global Fund immediately.'

TB drug breakthrough on its way?

An Indian scientist has discovered a molecule which he claims can be a harbinger for a single drug therapy to treat tuberculosis and replace the current costly multidrug treatment for the killer disease. 'TB bacteria have a complex coat over their surface which is unique. We, through our research, have been trying to find the enzyme that helps in forming the upper layer of the bacterium,' Rajesh Gokhale of the National Institute of Immunology told Press Trust of India.

A team of researchers led by Gokhale found that the new molecule hits four of the bacterium's crucial metabolic pathways at the same time, weakening and ultimately destroying the pathogen. 'Right now, tuberculosis patients take a cocktail of four drugs and each inhibits a

single enzyme,' said Gokhale, a Howard Hughes Medical Institute research scholar. 'Targeting several enzymes at the same time is a much more efficient approach. Theoretically, patients wouldn't have to take several drugs, they could just take one.' But the research, which is at the preliminary test tube level, needs funding for the next step. 'The enzymes have to be tested on animals for the new findings to turn into drugs for human use,' said Gokhale.

Africa

Zimbabwe: Put human rights at the top of the political agenda

As the Zimbabwean political parties finalised the process of setting up a new government, Amnesty International (AI) challenged the new regime to demonstrate a commitment to human rights in its first 100 days in power. It also called for the immediate and unconditional release of Prisoners of Conscience, Jestina Mukoko, Broderick Takawira and Pascal Gonzo, who have workers who have been in custody since early December when they were abducted by state security agents. The organisation also expressed concern over the continued ill-treatment of political detainees, like Fidelis Chiramba of the MDC, reportedly in urgent need of hospitalisation. AI issued a five-point human rights agenda for the new government to implement as its first steps to address Zimbabwe's legacy of impunity for human rights violations.

For nearly a decade the people of Zimbabwe had endured 'immense suffering as a result of the government's policies against perceived opponents.' 'Against this background we are calling on President Robert Mugabe and Prime Minister-designate Morgan Tsvangirai to take concrete steps to demonstrate their government's commitment to internationally recognised human rights,' said Simeon Mawanza, Amnesty International's Zimbabwe expert.

The deteriorating economic and social conditions should also be a priority as the people of Zimbabwe urgently needed food, housing, essential health care, safe drinking water, sanitation and education. If the government was unable to deliver these basic necessities, it should seek international co-operation and assistance and remove unnecessary restrictions.

On 5 February the Parliament of Zimbabwe passed Amendment No. 19 to the Constitution which allows the setting up of an Inclusive Government. Morgan Tsvangirai of the MDC was sworn in as the country's Prime Minister on 11 February together with two Deputy Prime Ministers. Other members of the cabinet and deputy ministers were sworn in two days later.

At least 30 political detainees are known to be in custody at present. These include the director of the Zimbabwe Peace Project, Jestina Mukoko, two members of her staff and more than two dozen MDC activists abducted between October and December 2008. The state has been accused of torture and has repeatedly frustrated efforts by the detainees to get access to much-needed health care.

South Africa

Government's prison ARV obfuscation 'reprehensible' – Judge

In a notable victory for transparency and a scathing indictment of government obfuscation, the Pretoria High Court has ordered the Minister of Correctional Services to furnish the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) with unedited copies of a report of the Judicial Inspectorate of Prisons (JIOP) into the death of a Westville Prison inmate ('MM') in August 2006. Judge Southwood labelled the conduct of Correctional Services Minister Ngconde Balfour and his officials as 'reprehensible'.

The prisoner's medical records showed that he was HIV positive but had only been put on ARV treatment a few weeks before his death. According to government's own ARV treatment guidelines, MM should have been initiated on ARV treatment in November of 2003 – some 32 months earlier. Shortly after MM's death, the TAC – a co-applicant in the case – requested that the JIOP conduct an investigation into MM's death and other related matters at Westville Correctional Centre. This was completed in or around December 2006. According to the JIOP, its report was sent to the Minister of Correctional Services shortly thereafter. Repeated efforts on the part of the TAC's legal representatives – the AIDS Law Project (ALP) – to gain access to the MM report failed.

After the provisions of the Promotion of Access to Information Act 2000 (PAIA) were exhausted, the TAC instructed the ALP to file an application on its behalf

in the Pretoria High Court to compel the Minister to provide it with a copy of the report. The judgment is scathing in its condemnation of the Minister's conduct, as well as the conduct of many officials within his department. It does not accept the Minister's denial that he received the MM report, nor does it accept 'any suggestion' that the department did not receive it and was not in possession of it. Simply put, the Court holds that the Minister's version of the MM report's whereabouts 'is so far-fetched and untenable that it must be rejected'.

The judgment went further, describing the manner in which the Minister and his department showed 'complete disregard for the Constitution and PAIA': 'Only after proceedings were instituted did the Minister and the Department attempt to justify failure to hand over the report and then on spurious grounds. It is disturbing that the first respondent has relied on technical points which have no merit and instead of complying with its constitutional obligations has waged a war of attrition in the court. This is not what is expected of a government Minister and a state department. In my view their conduct is not only inconsistent with the Constitution and PAIA but is reprehensible. It forces the applicant to litigate at considerable expense and is a waste of public funds,' Judge Southwood said.

Now it's the Free State in budget trouble

First it was a 'top heavy' KwaZulu-Natal health department due to overrun its budget by at least R2 billion this financial year (08/09), as tertiary hospitals continued to function with doctor shortages of more than 60%.

An *SAMJ Izindaba* review of annual KZN health department reports from 2006 to 2008 showed a growth in departmental staff numbers of 13 360 people and a budget spending increase of R5.5 billion (including a R1.2 billion overspend for 07/08). In spite of the heavy spending, the average of medical specialist vacancies at Pietermaritzburg and Durban's tertiary hospitals stands at 70% and 63% respectively. Medical officer vacancies at the two hospital complexes are 28% and 63% respectively. Any claims that tertiary service delivery had at least been maintained over recent years were dramatically belied by these figures.

Now antiretroviral shortages in the Free State have reached crisis proportions, according to the TAC. The Free State health department announced in November last year that its financial situation had reached 'dire proportions' forcing it to postpone all non-emergency surgery until January and stop all non-critical staff appointments. HIV clinics were coming under increasing threat of being closed down as they were considered part of the outpatient services which were being stopped. At the time the TAC said it also continued to receive reports from doctors who were turning critically ill patients away from their clinics because of antiretroviral shortages. 'A large number of people will die over Christmas. These cuts immediately translate into death, that is the open and shut of it,' Dr Francois Venter, President of the HIV Clinicians Society, said at the time.

Questions posed by the TAC that have remain unanswered include details around the financial resources provided to the Free State, how the additional resources have been spent, whether the moratorium on initiating new patients on treatment has been rescinded (if not, why not), what plans have been put in place to initiate those patients needing treatment, which services had been put on hold due to the budget crisis and whether there had been any formal communication between the province, health professionals and patients. The Free State department of health failed to meet both the 5 and 26 January deadlines to respond to the TAC letters.

Hogan: We will help Free State

Health Minister Barbara Hogan vowed to do 'whatever it takes' to rescue the collapsing Free State's antiretroviral roll-out programme. 'I have already taken and will continue to take urgent steps to ensure that any delay where it is the result of financial pressures is immediately addressed,' she said. The province's health department late last year stopped initiating new patients on the medication with the exception of pregnant women, due to lack of funds.

'I can assure you that it is the intention of the government, the National Department of Health and the MECs for health to ensure that all reasonable steps are urgently taken to ensure that priority is given to resuming patient initiation in the Free State,' she said. Hogan added that similar steps were

also being taken in other provinces. She said additional funding was also being sought through donors and that she was in discussions with the National Treasury in this regard.

Hogan said she would do whatever she could to ensure that all patients in the country had reasonable access to health care services, including life-saving medicines. However, she also called on stakeholders to immediately share with her information where the care of a patient had been compromised due to financial pressures. Her call was extended to places where the alleged stock of any essential drug had been depleted.

HIV gel breakthrough

A study has found that a new vaginal gel called Pro2000 reduces the odds of HIV infection by 30% in women, says the Medical Research Council (MRC). 'For the first time since the epidemic we are seeing something that would provide an option for women to prevent infection,' principal investigator Professor Gita Ramjee told journalists at the council's branch in Chatsworth. The results of the study were also presented at an international meeting in Montreal, Canada, on 9 February.

The study, involving 3 099 women, was conducted between February 2005 and September 2008 in Malawi, South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe and the USA. Ramjee said two products were tested: Pro2000 and BufferGel.

During the course of the study, 194 infections occurred – 36 infections among women using Pro2000, 54 infections among women using BufferGel, 51 infections among participants who were given a placebo gel, and 53 infections among participants who used no gel. Women in the three gel groups reported using gel 81% of the time during sex and reported using condoms 72% of the time. Women who were in the no-gel group reported using condoms 81% of the time, a difference that is statistically different. Both BufferGel and PRO 2000 Gel were found to be acceptable. Nearly all women (99%) reported they would use the gels if approved for HIV prevention.

CHRIS BATEMAN