

World HIV infection rates down

A United Nations Global Report on the HIV/AIDS epidemic today noted a significant reversal in the epidemic worldwide, even though an estimated 33.3 million people globally have the HIV virus that causes AIDS.

After sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean has a higher HIV prevalence than any other area of the world, with one per cent of the adult population infected.

According to the report, the total number of HIV-infected people in 2009 was down slightly from the previous year's 33.4 million and at least 56 countries have either stabilised or achieved significant declines in rates of new HIV infections.

It noted that while more than five million people in need of the antiretroviral drugs were getting them, a significant majority of those in poorer countries were not able to get them.

The 2010 report notes also that a number of groups, like drug users and sex workers are far less likely to get help than others.

"For the first time, we can say that we are breaking the trajectory of the AIDS epidemic. We have halted and begun to reverse the epidemic. Fewer people are becoming infected with HIV and fewer people are dying from AIDS," UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibe said.

Since the beginning of the epidemic in the 1980s, more than 60 million people have been infected with HIV and nearly 30 million have died of HIV-related causes.

The human immunodeficiency virus that causes AIDS can be controlled with cocktails of drugs, but there is no cure.

The UNAIDS report found that new HIV infections have reduced by nearly 20 per cent in the past 10 years, and among young people in 15 of the most severely affected countries, rates of HIV have fallen by more than 25 per cent as the young adopt safer sexual practices.

There are still two new HIV infections for every one person starting HIV treatment.

"Just a few years ago, there were five new infections for every two people starting treatment," Sidibe said, adding "we are closing the gap between prevention and treatment."

But he stressed the numbers did not mean the world could declare "mission accomplished" on tackling AIDS.

UNAIDS said there was an estimated \$15.9 billion available for the global AIDS response in 2009, \$10 billion short of the estimated need.

"Demand is outstripping supply. Stigma, discrimination and bad laws continue to place roadblocks for people living with HIV and people on the margins," Sidibe said.