

'Hope Arrives' as New US-Funded AIDS Center Opens in Africa

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February 03, 2005

Nairobi, Kenya (CNSNews.com) - A new U.S.-funded AIDS treatment and caring center, located in a middle-class neighborhood of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, aims to serve thousands of poor Kenyans who cannot afford lifesaving anti-retroviral drugs.

The center is one of several in Africa that are benefiting from President Bush's \$15 billion Emergency Plan for HIV/AIDS.

"Today, we celebrate the arrival of hope. This center is a model for Africa," U.S. ambassador to Kenya William Bellamy said at the facility's opening ceremony on Tuesday evening.

"The United States has chosen the path of action and hope," the envoy added, and challenged Africa's other development partners to take firm action in the battle against the AIDS epidemic.

The new center is a treatment facility that offers comprehensive services to patients free of charge.

The services include voluntary counseling and testing; clinical assessments; nutritional counseling; social work; and a post-test club for those found to be infected with HIV, the deadly AIDS virus.

The center is a joint effort between the Coptic Orthodox Church's Coptic Hospital and the University of Washington in Seattle.

Prof. King Holmes, director of the University of Washington's Center for AIDS and STD [sexually-transmitted diseases], said the Nairobi facility was designed to offer the same standards as those used for HIV/AIDS treatment and care in the U.S.

"The mission of this center is to centralize and increase the quality of care for the HIV/AIDS patients," he said.

Already, the center is caring for 1,000 AIDS patients and treating an average of 50 people a day. Bishop Paul of the Coptic Orthodox Church said it would eventually increase its capacity to treat 3,000 people.

Some of the patients are receiving anti-retroviral medicines which were initially supplied by the Kenyan government, but incoming batches of the drugs will be supplied by the American government, Bellamy said.

The ambassador said AIDS patients he had spoken to talked of their health condition having improved dramatically because of the center.

"I have realized how fast we can make a turnaround in the lives of AIDS patients when we change the way our institutions do business," he said.

Bellamy challenged the Kenyan and other African governments to swiftly put to use millions of dollars already advanced by the World Bank and other donor institutions for implementing anti-AIDS programs.

"Hope delayed is hope denied," he said. "People need anti-retrovirals now, not after six months."

President Bush made the pledge of \$15 billion in 2002 to fight HIV/AIDS in 14 specified African and Caribbean countries, with Vietnam later added to the list.

The aim of the five-year plan is to treat two million HIV-infected people, prevent seven million new infections, and provide care for 10 million people infected and affected by HIV/AIDS, including orphans and vulnerable children.

Of the total, \$9 billion will go to 15 hard-hit countries while the rest is to be earmarked for ongoing bilateral programs in more than 100 countries and for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS.