

People-to-people contact with India

Spread of AIDS a matter of concern for Pakistan

By Ali Waqar

LAHORE: The spread of HIV/AIDS has become a matter of concern for Pakistan because of the people-to-people contact between India and Pakistan, since India is one of the largest countries in the world with the disease, said reporters at a workshop on 'Meeting the Challenges of AIDS in Pakistan'.

The Pakistan National AIDS Consortium (PNAC) arranged the workshop in collaboration with the Punjab chapter of the European Commission (EC) Pearl Continental Hotel on Tuesday. The workshop was arranged to highlight the importance of the media's role in the prevention and control of the disease.

Experts on HIV/AIDS, various groups and HIV/AIDS patients

voice their opinion and talk about the problems faced by them.

The workshop asked participating government officials that what was being done for HIV/AIDS screening.

Dr Ali Razzaque from the Punjab Health Department, who is also coordinator of the Punjab AIDS Control Programme, said the issue was serious and it was being discussed by the government. He said it was a matter of concern that people crossing the border could be infected with the disease, but the government could not force anybody to be screened for HIV/AIDS. The government across the border should make people go through a screening test before giving them visas, he added.

He said that in addition to HIV/AIDS, organs for transplants bought from across the border were also a major threat

established in Punjab, which would begin operating soon to streamline the private blood bank system. Thirty two hundred AIDS patients (512 from Punjab) had been identified in Pakistan while 100,000 cases had been reported, he said, adding that the country was gradually making its way out of the high risk zone. The doctor briefed the meeting on the government's measures to control the disease and said that it had become a concentrated epidemic in Pakistan.

PNAC National Manger Qadeer Beig said that AIDS patients should not be considered untouchables. People were of the view that AIDS was a disease from non-Muslim countries, but there were several Muslim countries with the prevalence of the disease, he said and cite Pakistan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Ukraine,

that 40.3 million cases of the disease had been reported worldwide.

The workshop was told that cases were reported for the first time in 1980 in Pakistan. The disease has encompassed sex workers, injecting drug users, transport workers, migrant labourers and inmates since 1995. The highest number of reported and identified cases in Pakistan is from Balochistan.

The workshop identified poverty, illiteracy, gender inequality, migration, commercial sex industry, lack of the use of condoms and inadequate blood transfusion screening as the factors contributing to the disease. "To prevent a generalised epidemic, HIV infection should be controlled at the low epidemic stage when it is below five per cent in vulnerable groups," said experts. Several HIV AIDS patients from cities like Kasar told the work-