Aids epidemic is a disaster

The AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa is so severe that it should be classed as a disaster comparable to floods or famine, a new study by the Red Cross says. Geneva - The AIDS epidemic in Southern Africa is so severe that it should be classed as a disaster comparable to floods or famine, a new study by the Red Cross said on Thursday. In its annual "World Disasters Report", the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) said that there was "no doubt" that HIV/AIDS matches the United Nations definition of a disaster.

The UN's Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs classes a disaster as a "serious disruption of the functioning of a society, causing widespread human, material or environmental losses which exceed the ability of a society to cope using only its own resources". The IFRC said that such a situation exists in sub-Saharan Africa, which is home to about two-thirds of the world's HIV-positive cases. **1 in 10 has HIV** At least one person in ten is living with HIV in nations such as South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland and Zambia, the report said.

The consequences of the epidemic are felt by all of society and not just those who are sick, due to the economic strain and social tensions. "Reflecting on the lives of most people living in sub-Saharan Africa raises more alarm than hope," the IFRC said. "The virus is directly responsible for restraining and reducing human and resource capacities across societies because HIV infections and AIDS deaths are common among workers of all qualifications and expertise, and in all industries. "Coupled with the high costs of caring for people living with HIV, those capacity constraints lead to withered health and education systems, declining food security, skilled labour shortages and an increasingly ramshackled infrastructure," the report warned.

The World Health Organisation said earlier this month that the number of people in developing countries receiving antiretroviral drugs to combat HIV had risen sevenfold in the past three years to nearly three million by 2007. But a WHO co-authored report found that much more needed to be done: despite the increase, an estimated 6.7 million people in need of anti-retrovirals were still unable to access medicines, out of a total of 9.7 million.

The report, produced in conjunction with UNAIDS and Unicef, said that the rise was due to the increased availability of drugs, in part due to price cuts, but also to delivery systems better adapted to specific country needs. But there was also increased demand for the treatment, as the number of people tested and diagnosed with HIV climbed, the WHO noted.

Earlier this year, a joint UN study found that more than two million children worldwide were living with the HIV virus in 2007, most of whom were infected before they were born.