

Exposing China's hidden HIV crisis

When delegates to the XV International AIDS Conference in Bangkok sat down to listen to a speech by Amnesty International Secretary-General Irene Khan, they found, on each of their chairs, an urgent petition on behalf of HIV/AIDS activists Wang Guofeng and Li Suzhi.

Irene Khan opened her speech to the conference by asking everyone in the audience to sign the petition, which was based on the text of UA 221/04, issued the previous day (a tireless Amnesty delegate had stayed up until 5am turning the appeal into a petition and making 500 photocopies).

Over 400 signed UAs were later collected and taken to the Chinese embassy in Bangkok, with delegates carrying banners and chanting. There was a lot of press coverage, with photos in the *Bangkok Post* and the *Nation*, and our hardy delegate was interviewed by Reuters. When no official from the embassy would come to receive the UAs, delegates left them outside.

The couple featured in the UA, Wang Guofeng and Li Suzhi, were both infected with HIV when they gave blood. They had been detained in an apparent attempt to prevent them from travelling to Beijing to petition the health department there about lack of access to medical treatment. One month after the UA was issued, they were both released.

Their cases highlighted a problem largely ignored by the Chinese media, which is subject to rigorous state control. Reports on HIV/AIDS in the Chinese press tend to

Protestors outside Chinese embassy, Bangkok © Amnesty International

highlight intravenous drug use and unprotected sex as the main reasons for the rapid spread of the virus in China since the mid-1980s, and downplay the devastating impact of blood-collecting stations that operated in many parts of China during the late 1980s and 1990s. These were particularly busy in several villages in Henan and other central provinces, where the payments on offer were highly lucrative for impoverished villagers.

Many of the blood banks were run by local government health departments, while others were illegal operations known as "blood heads" (*xuetou*). They proliferated due to a highly profitable global demand for blood plasma. The blood-collection centres failed to follow basic safety procedures in taking blood. As a result, HIV infections soared. Estimates on the number of people infected in Henan Province alone through the use of such facilities range from 150,000 to over one million. Throughout China, according to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), by the end of 2001 up to 1.5 million people had been infected with HIV,

Bringing the petition to the embassy © Amnesty International

and this figure could rise to 10 million by 2010 unless the authorities take effective action.

Although there are now signs of a greater openness on this issue in China, until recently the government's attitude to the HIV situation in the country has been one of suppression and denial. In August 2002 China's foremost HIV/AIDS activist, Dr Wan Yanhai, was arrested on suspicion of "leaking state secrets" after he published on his website lists of people who had died of AIDS-related illnesses in Henan province, derived from a leaked internal local government document. He was released one month later after widespread international protests, including appeals from the UA network. (See UA 273/02, ASA 17/043/2002, 2 September 2002, and follow-ups.) It is highly unusual for anyone to be released without charge if they are suspected of such serious "offences", which are usually punished with long prison sentences.

With so many HIV infections centred in Henan, certain villages in the province have become centres of AIDS activism. In the village of Xionqiao, where over one third of the population are HIV-positive through selling their blood, 16 people were arrested in June 2003 after HIV-positive villagers went to the provincial capital to protest at the lack of health care in the village. Several were reportedly beaten, and all were at risk of torture or other ill-treatment, including denial of medical care, in custody. It has not been possible to find out what has happened to the detainees since we issued a UA on their behalf, but we know from former prisoners that even if a UA doesn't always lead to release, it often helps to improve the conditions in which they are held (UA 210/03, ASA 17/030/2003).

Unfortunately, despite the international attention being focused on this issue, HIV/AIDS activists are still being detained in China – among them Li Dan, who set up a school for AIDS orphans, and was recently detained in Henan in an apparent attempt to intimidate him and

discourage him from engaging in his advocacy work. Amnesty International will continue to campaign on these cases, and the intervention of the Urgent Action network will continue to play a crucial role.

One of the 400 UA appeals © Amnesty International