

# Study: South Africa Deaths Rise Sharply

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JOHANNESBURG, South Africa - South Africa's death rate rose sharply over a seven-year period and the increase is partly due to the country's staggering AIDS epidemic, the government said.

The government statistical office said the death rate for women aged 20 to 39 had more than tripled between 1997 and 2004, and had more than doubled for men aged 30 to 44. It said those groups had the highest number of deaths from AIDS.

The report gave no estimate for the increase in HIV deaths, saying many AIDS-related deaths are attributed on death certificates to other causes.

"Large increases in the death rates of women in their 20s and 30s since the late 1990s are thought to result mainly from HIV," the government said in its report Thursday.

The government said the increase in the death rate is also due to nutritional deficiencies and infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria.

However, the government said levels of HIV infection have risen rapidly and that the average time from becoming infected to death

was eight to 10 years. It was likely that "HIV deaths will continue to increase in South Africa for some years," according to the report.

The percentage of pregnant woman who are HIV-positive had risen from 1 percent in 1990 to 17 percent in 1997 and to 30 percent by 2004, the last year covered by the report.

Overall, the government has estimated more than 5.5 million South Africans are infected with HIV, a number second only to India and one that amounts to about an eighth of estimated cases worldwide.

On average, more than 900 people die of the disease in South Africa each day.

South Africa's government has come under mounting international criticism because of its handling of its AIDS epidemic. President Thabo Mbeki once questioned the link between HIV and AIDS and both he and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang have doubted the effectiveness of anti-retroviral drugs used to treat AIDS.

More than 80 international AIDS scientists, including an American Nobel laureate and one of the co-discoverers of the virus that causes AIDS, released a letter to Mbeki on Wednesday that called South Africa's AIDS policies inefficient and immoral and urged the president to fire his health minister.

Stephen Lewis, the U.N. Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa, delivered a scathing attack on South Africa at the International AIDS conference in Toronto last month, saying the government was "still obtuse, dilatory and negligent" about providing treatment.

"It is the only country in Africa whose government continues to promote theories more worthy of a lunatic fringe than of a concerned, compassionate state," he said.

South Africa called Lewis' comments "unacceptable" and claimed to have the largest HIV treatment program in the world. It said it was treating 140,000 people in treatment programs, a figure less than half of the 380,000 target it set in 2003. The AIDS scientists said about 500,000 South Africans now need AIDS drugs to survive. The increase in the death rate for almost every age and gender group in the study was particularly disturbing because the worldwide trend is for the rates to decline over the period.

"South Africa is a member of a select but undesirable group of countries in which life expectancy at birth declined by four years or more between 1990 and 2001," the government said. It said all the countries are either in Africa or part of the former Soviet Union. The report found that deaths from murder, suicide and accidents changed little and the number of killings had declined since the late 1990s. But the government said South Africa probably still has "the second highest homicide rate in the world, trailing only Colombia."