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Thabo Mbeki claims he doesn't know anyone with HIV, yet three of his officials died of aids … like 600 South Africans do every day. So why is he still in denial?

From Fred Bridgland In Johannesburg

The epic clash between Nelson Mandela and South African President Thabo Mbeki on the HIV/Aids plague which has killed 18,000 South Africans this month - and will kill as many again in October - has achieved a new level of intensity.

In an extraordinary statement in Washington last week, Mbeki said he knew no-one among his fellow citizens who had died of Aids or who was HIV-positive.

The leader’s remarks have been greeted with astonishment in a country that has more HIV-positive people - five million - than any other nation; where, each day, 600 people die from Aids-related infections; that already has 850,000 Aids orphans; where 650,000 people become HIV-positive each year, and where the population is forecast to drop by five million by 2050 because of HIV/Aids, instead of a projected 20m increase if the virus was absent.

“Personally, I don’t know anybody who has died of Aids,” Mbeki told the Washington Post before he addressed the opening session of the United Nations General Assembly.
Untrue, incomprehensible, a total denial, responded disease workers in South Africa.

"This is very shocking," said Rukia Cornelius, spokeswoman for the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), South Africa’s most powerful activist group supporting people living with HIV. "Is our president a hands-on president or not? Are 600 dead people a day not enough?"

Mark Heywood, the TAC’s national treasurer, told the Sunday Herald: "Our reaction is one of dismay and disappointment. It’s perplexing, a veiled statement of his conviction that HIV doesn’t cause Aids.

"He has had close contact with African National Congress leaders who have died of Aids, such as his own presidential spokesman Parks Mankahlana, and Peter Mokaba."

Before he died two years ago, Mankahlana stated that saving babies’ lives by giving anti-retroviral drugs to HIV-positive pregnant women would only contribute to the country’s orphan crisis because the mothers were doomed to die anyway. When Mankahlana died, Mbeki said his spokesman had been poisoned by the drugs he had begun taking to fight Aids. Last year Mokaba, a former leader of the ANC youth league, died of Aids at the age of 43. Just last week the ANC and the TAC together arranged the funeral of Edward Mabunda, a senior ANC leader and colleague of Mbeki, in the Winterveld, a sprawling township north of Pretoria. "Edward’s coffin was draped in the ANC flag and he had made a point of saying before he died that he had Aids," said Heywood.

However, asked if he knew anyone who is HIV-positive, Mbeki told the Washington Post: "I really, honestly don’t."

The TAC and South Africa’s official opposition, the Democratic Alliance, reacted by saying the ranks of Mbeki’s government and ANC parliamentary MPs were infected with HIV and enjoying the use of anti-retrovirals provided by a special medical aid scheme. Anti-retrovirals are not provided in state hospitals.

Mike Waters, opposition spokesman on HIV/Aids, said: "It is clear that [members of] President Mbeki’s inner circle are rich enough to afford their own anti-
retrovirals and that the president has little sympathy or understanding of the epidemic sweeping our country.”

Heywood said the TAC knew of a number of senior people in government and the ANC who are HIV-positive. "This kind of statement will make them reluctant to reveal their HIV status. Mbeki’s comments emphasise that his resistance [to admitting that HIV causes Aids] hasn’t gone away.”

Heywood said the president was close to Judge Edwin Cameron, an ANC sympathiser who Mbeki appointed to South Africa’s supreme court of appeal. In April 1999 Cameron became the first public official in the country to disclose that he was HIV-positive. Four-and-a-half years later, Cameron remains the only person in public office living openly with the virus.

Calls for the anti-retroviral drugs to be made available were echoed by a top UN official at a conference on Aids in Africa held in Nairobi yesterday.

Dr Peter Piot, the executive director of UNAids, said that because of Aids "Africa is now in a state of emergency comparable only to war". He singled out greater access to cheaper anti-Aids drugs as a major challenge for the continent, and described the tiny number of Africans on the drugs as a "disgrace". Access to drugs has been the main topic of the summit, although a US official was shouted down by HIV-infected Africans when she tried to defend her country’s contribution to the fight against Aids.

In their second protest at the week-long gathering, activists from across Africa stood up and walked towards the podium, waving placards and whistling and jeering at Leslie Rowe, a diplomat from the US embassy in Nairobi, demanding that the US pays more to fight Aids in Africa. President George Bush has proposed spending $15 billion to fight the epidemic over the next five years in Africa and the Caribbean. A total of about $1bn was spent on fighting HIV/AIDS in Africa in 2002.

The big gun of African politics also spoke this week on Aids, and former State President Nelson Mandela made no bones about his unhappiness with the situation. Seated next to the richest man in the world, Microsoft chief Bill Gates, in Johannesburg last week, Mandela issued his latest warning that South Africa faces destruction from the scourge of Aids and urged a breaking of the silence
on the disease. Though enough of a politician to avoid directly accusing Mbeki, there was no question whom the target was when he said: “This silence is as serious a killer as the virus itself”.

"Aids is clearly a disaster,” said Mandela. “It is effectively wiping out the development gains of the past decade and sabotaging the future. Decades have been chopped off life expectancy. Child mortality is expected to more than double.

"The fight against Aids will require another social revolution. Once more the youth of our country are called upon to play a leading role in a social revolution, as they did so heroically in the revolutionary struggle against apartheid.”

Mandela has joined up with Gates in the fight against Aids. The $24bn (£14.5bn) Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has donated $60m (£36.1m) to research in South Africa into microbiocides - a potential Aids-prevention method for women whose sexual partners refuse to use condoms. Mandela has demonstrated his opposition to Mbeki by embracing Zackie Achmat, a leading anti-apartheid activist who is HIV-positive and has become the icon of the TAC’s campaign to force Mbeki to recognise the seriousness of the HIV/Aids plague.

In 1998, in a protest against Mbeki’s refusal to provide anti-Aids drugs to millions of HIV-positive South Africans, Achmat stopped taking drugs that he could afford. He gave up his protest only two months ago as his body was in danger of being overwhelmed by opportunistic infections hastened by the virus. Mandela hugged Achmat, donned a T-shirt proclaiming "I am HIV-positive” and toured a Cape Town clinic where charity Médecins Sans Frontières gives drugs to 400 HIV-positive South Africans.

Achmat encouraged Mbeki and his Cabinet to take HIV tests and make the results public to help lift the stigma around the disease. "I also encourage him to visit the TAC to make friends with the thousands of people living with HIV, and to witness the deaths of people who do not have access to medicines,” he said.
As Millions Die
By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

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JOHANNESBURG — A generation ago, Americans protested and held divestment rallies in a snowballing movement against the injustices of South African apartheid.

These days, an incomparably greater injustice — random sickness and death, often striking infants — ravages South Africa. Yet the response in America and Europe, as in Africa itself, has been tepid.

The South African president, Thabo Mbeki, for years pursued a disgraceful policy of raising doubts about whether H.I.V. causes AIDS and questioning basic policies to confront the crisis. Even now, although Mr. Mbeki has largely backed down, AIDS sufferers are slow to seek treatment because of the doubts Mr. Mbeki has sown.

Mr. Mbeki's know-nothing obstructionism has killed incomparably more South Africans than any apartheid leader ever did.

South Africa announced this year that it will begin treating AIDS patients with antiretrovirals. I'll believe it when I see it. It is inexcusable that the country with the best medical infrastructure in Africa should also be the one with the most H.I.V. and AIDS sufferers — and that in 2003 they should die untreated.

In America, we think of AIDS simply as an epidemic. In fact, like the Holocaust, it is a moral challenge to the world, one we are failing.

"It's mass murder by complacency," declared Stephen Lewis, the United Nations special envoy for AIDS in Africa, adding: "The time for polite, even agitated entreaties is over. This pandemic cannot be allowed to continue, and those who
watch it unfold with a kind of pathological equanimity must be held to account."

AIDS is not only killing the sick, but also crushing the healthy. "There are two kinds of people here," says Dr. Marlin McKay, who treats AIDS patients in Johannesburg. "The infected and the affected."

Already, across southern Africa, a new kind of famine is spreading, as those enfeebled by AIDS can no longer work their fields or hold jobs. Those most vulnerable are the 11 million African children who have lost at least one parent to AIDS (the number is expected to rise to 20 million by 2010).

"Getting money for food and clothing is very difficult," said Thembi Mashaba, an AIDS orphan who now is responsible for her school-age younger brother and sister. To help pay the bills, she has found a boyfriend who chips in $27 a month to the family pot; such liaisons help women and children survive, but they also spread AIDS further.

"I'd say 65 percent of girls aged 14 to 18 sleep with older men for money," said Sandile Mohlape, a social worker in Sekhukhune, a rural area northeast of Pretoria. "We do not have 14-year-old girls sleeping with 14-year-old boys. No, the girls sleep with men who are over 30. They do it out of poverty, to get food to eat.

"They are aware of AIDS, but they need food and money, so they can't tell the man to use a condom. Most men won't use a condom. They say it is like eating bread with the plastic bag still around it."

Rape is common and deadly, for 45 percent of the rapists caught in South Africa have the AIDS virus. More broadly, social mores and institutions are eroding amid the desperation, leaving society increasingly a free-for-all.

"Teachers are asking for sex to pass a girl, or to give her a good grade," said Thulani Nkosi, himself a 10th grade teacher with H.I.V., although he says he has never done this himself. Ultimately, AIDS may leave some African countries as failed states; a World Bank study in June warned that if South Africa does not combat the epidemic, it will face "a complete economic collapse."

The little African country of Botswana is ground zero in the epidemic, for some
39 percent of adults have AIDS or H.I.V. You see its impact everywhere on Botswana's streets, in the form of cadaverous adults and children.

Yet Botswana is also a rare place of hope. It has led the way in Africa in providing treatment, and 7,700 people are now getting antiretroviral drugs to fight AIDS. Dr. Ernest Darkoh, who helps run the program, notes that of those getting the drugs, 85 percent have had the virus suppressed after six months of treatment.

Botswana shows that millions of lives can be saved if only we act aggressively — which simply raises the question: Why aren't we?