

Lanka HIV rate low, but poverty, war a threat: UN

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COLOMBO: Sri Lanka has one of the lowest prevalence rates of HIV in Asia, but poverty and displacement of civilians due to renewed civil war are making the island increasingly vulnerable, the UN said yesterday.

An estimated 5,000 people had HIV in Sri Lanka by the end of 2005, out of a population of around 20mn.

Neighbouring India, by comparison, has the world's third highest HIV caseload after South Africa and Nigeria, with around 2.5mn people living with the virus.

"In Sri Lanka, the prevalence rate is low, but the challenge is to keep it low," said Caitlin Wiesen-Antin, HIV/Aids regional coordinator Asia and Pacific for the UN Development Programme.

Sri Lanka's military says around 35,000 people displaced since last year in the island's east amid renewed fighting between the state and Tamil Tiger rebels are still living in camps or with friends and relatives.

The military says it has resettled more than 100,000 people in the east in recent months, but there are also tens of thousands of long-term displaced elsewhere across the island forced from their homes by earlier stages of the conflict, many living in very rudimentary conditions.

"When people are displaced from their home, their usual system of justice sometimes does not exist. That becomes a heightened area of vulnerability," Caitlin said.

"In other countries, what we have found is that once people have been displaced from homes, they find it difficult ... in terms of their livelihoods.

"They don't have the option to feed their families. So some people under duress resort to actions such as transactional sex for education, for housing, just to make ends meet," she added.

"And that transactional sex is not protected sex."

Sri Lanka will next week host the International Congress on Aids in Asia and the Pacific, with over 2,000 delegates from 40 countries due to attend. – Reuters



Madhu Bhushan (right), Coordinator Asian Women's Human Rights Council, talks as Caitlin Wiesen-Antin, regional HIV/Aids team leader at the UNDP's Regional Centre looks on during the media briefing in Colombo yesterday

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