



IV287 - April 1997

The Wretched of the Earth Rise Up

1 April 1997, by **Yorgos Mitralias**

The subsequent social explosion quickly brought forth a fairly well structured popular administration, which challenged the Berisha regime, in a situation of dual power. The balance of forces quickly shifted against the President, and a third force, the leadership of the Socialist Party and the rest of the old opposition, stepped into the vacuum of power, and assumed the dominant position. For how long? Nobody knows.

How exotic Albania seems! The mass of analysis and comment produced by the Western media all leads us to one conclusion: Albania is totally unique, and the Albanians do not belong to the "civilised world".

The revolt erupted because Albanians are so naive that "pyramid" schemes separated most of them from their savings. These schemes were run by financial institutions which could never exist elsewhere. The insurrection opposes the country's two tribes, northern Tosks and southern Ghegs. The civil war can only lead to a "chaos" which, for Albania, has never been far below the surface.

How comforting to know that the Albanian case is unique in Western Europe, that the popular revolt there has no similarity with the revolutions of the past, and order can only be re-established from outside. Because, at the end of the day, and whether you

see them as noble savages, or poor bastards, the Albanians are unable to enter the modern world without the aid of the civilised nations.

Reality check

All this is rubbish. Albanians are no more naive than the five million Romanians, three million Russians and half-million Bulgarians who have "invested" their savings in pyramid schemes. Many Macedonians continue to risk their savings in this way.

Unstable pyramid investment schemes, like Vefa in Albania, and MMM in Russia are not some invention of the post-communist era. Pyramid schemes were invented in the USA in the 1930s, and were — for a while — fantastically popular in Western Europe.

The real difference between Luxembourg in the 1930s and Albania in 1996 is the IMF pressure which obliged Tirana to abolish guarantees on bank deposits, and liberalise the banking and financial sector to the point that pyramid schemes offering monthly interest rates of up to 100% became legally possible.

This wasn't a "mistake" by the authorities and the IMF, but a deliberate attempt to encourage the primitive accumulation of capital which Albania's fledgling bourgeoisie

so badly needs. One new banking company, Vefa quickly became a holding company controlling at least 240 enterprises, from a super-market chain to petrol stations, seaside hotels and food processing plants.

The total fraud exceeds US\$2 billion, or 80% of the country's Gross Domestic Product — the total value of goods and services produced in a year. The capitalists would have rightly considered this exploit to be a major success if only the armed insurrection had not occurred.

The IMF, World Bank and other international institutions are not just guilty of "selective blindness" towards the pyramid schemes. For several years, they had been boosting the myth of an Albanian economy growing at an unparalleled rate of over 10%/year. Albania was a model, they argued. And President Sali Berisha was a true soldier of neo-liberalism.

This is another falsehood. "They made fools out of us" admits an expert at Vienna's prestigious Institute of Comparative Studies. In fact, Albania's five years of economic reform are "catastrophic". Since the industrial base was almost totally destroyed in the early period, "it was not difficult to produce high growth rates for the foreseeable future". The starting point was so low that any growth was impressive in statistical terms.

Industry has been almost totally dismantled, and a majority of peasants, particularly in the south, have abandoned the agricultural sector. Unemployment affects up to 80% of the population. The only fast-growing sectors of the economy are those linked to the black market and organised crime (smuggling of all types, and marijuana cultivation). Berisha's capitalist Albania would have gone bankrupt years ago, were it not for the pitiful sums sent home by the 500,000 Albanians working illegally, in slave-like conditions, in Greece, Italy and other countries.

A nation-wide uprising

The south of Albania is traditionally more prosperous, more politicised and more restless, and the north poorer, quieter and more conservative. But the recent insurrection was a nation-wide phenomenon. It started in the towns of the south (Vlore, Saranda, Gjirokastra, Tepelene, and Delvino). But ten days later citizens in the north began to take to the streets. Western media reports of a Northern "counter-revolt" in support of Berisha are completely false. Even in the President's home town, Bajram Curri, the people burned all symbols of the detested regime, and chanted "down with Berisha".

The western press all talk of civil war. Where is the evidence? The army and police literally dissolved at the beginning of the insurrection, and the regime sought, in vain, to identify and fortify a social base. The civil war is an invention of western "Albania specialists". In reality, the immense majority of the Albanian population rose up. The small bourgeois layers, and the various servants of the regime preferred to keep their heads down, and wait for better days.

No "tribal" division, no pro-Berisha resistance, no civil war, and no massacres. Yes, there was an element of chaos, an element of "anarchy". But let's be clear. The bourgeois media presented this anarchy as the result of the collapse of the Albanian state, the institutions, and, above all, the repressive state forces — the army and police. After all, our rulers argue,

since order and law require a (bourgeois) state, an army and a police force, the collapse of these pillars of peace can only lead to anarchy. Right?

Dual power

Wrong! In only 4-5 days, people in the areas of revolt began to organise themselves, and create self-management and self-defence organs for each town or village. Then completely new municipal and district councils were elected. And the self-defence groups were transformed into fairly well disciplined partisan units, with clearly defined responsibilities, using former officers, and deserters from the Albanian Army.

For two weeks there was no regional co-ordination of these local self-management bodies. Then eight southern towns agreed to form a "National Committee of Public Salvation", composed of representatives of each "autonomous communal council". A further five towns quickly joined them. This was the beginning of a dual power situation. The rebels had appropriated almost all the attributes of state power— police, army, and civil administration.

There is still a shortage of information about the way these new organs of popular power actually operate. But it is clear that important decisions are taken at daily public meetings, usually in the town square. A large majority of the population participate. In Vlore and Gjirokastra public meetings overturned the conciliatory positions of their leaders, and re-stated that Berisha's resignation was an essential pre-condition to any settlement. On a number of occasions since then, local leaders have bent under pressure from western ambassadors, and agreed to all kinds of concessions, only to fail to win support for these policies in the general assemblies. The masses refuse to give up their arms until the regime is overturned, and Berisha kicked out.

When northern towns joined the revolt, they created similar self-management structures. By 12-13 March, there were two Albanias. Tirana, the capital, was under

Berisha's control, with agents of the "Shik" secret police patrolling all areas. Outside Tirana, the whole of the country was in revolt!

People, parties, and presidents

No surprise that the insurrection was not led by, and declared itself independent from the country's opposition parties. There is a huge gulf between the radicalism of the demands of the armed populace (resignation and trial of Sali Berisha, dismantling of the regime and the secret police, reorganisation of the state on a new basis, full reimbursement of the money stolen from the people through the pyramid schemes, punishment of those responsible, as an example to the others) and the conciliatory attitude which most opposition parties have adapted towards President Berisha.

Apart from the Democratic Alliance, Albania's political parties have been extremely moderate — a moderation which fails to hide their own fear of a self-managed popular movement which, in the final analysis, no longer has need of their services! Since the insurrection began in Vlore on February 28th, opposition leaders have been overtaken by the events, and have recognised that they are threatened with becoming irrelevant. Their own social base was melting away: the more the rank and file of the opposition parties radicalised, the deeper it became involved in the transformation of the revolt into an authentic revolution.

Before the uprising, no-one would have imagined that the leaders of all opposition parties would accept Berisha's authority, and sit down with him to discuss, and express support for, his proposals. Yet this is how the "opposition" has reacted to the uprising.

While Sali Berisha denounced the "red terrorists" who he said were behind the revolt, the Socialist Party (ex-Communist) agreed to join Berisha's "National Unity" government. As if they didn't realise who's members the president was labelling as "red

terrorists." The acting Socialist Party leader Bashkim Fino even became Prime Minister, while the undisputed leader of his party, Fatos Nano, remained in the prison cell where Berisha sent him in 1994!

Total confusion

The rank and file having disappeared, the Socialist Party leadership found itself without roots, and began to tear itself apart. Bashkim Fino met with leaders of the insurrection in Gjirokastra (where he used to be mayor), and recognised the "essential role" of the "people in arms." Meanwhile, a Socialist Party spokesperson denounced the costs of "anarchy" and called for a return to "the normal situation which existed before."

It surely seemed to the insurgent population that the opposition parties were, if not allies of Berisha, then certainly objectively acting in the President's interest. There was only one response possible: the National Public Salvation Committee immediately declared itself to be independent of all the political parties, and demanded that it participate directly in the negotiations, as a "third pole."

Unfortunately, without a clear-thinking political leadership, the popular movement was torn between its spontaneous dynamic, which subverted the old order, and the remnants of the population's sympathy for the opposition parties. Leading insurgents continued to demand that Berisha resign, but did not attack, verbally, those who had now associated themselves with the president. The insurgents "tolerated" Bashkim Fino's new Government of National Reconciliation, a government which protected Sali Berisha's role as President of the Republic, but at the same time the people refused to surrender their weapons, and submit to the authority of this government.

As a result, three weeks after the beginning of the insurrection, Albania had three centres of power.

The remnants of the old Berisha regime, disintegrating, but still

operative, thanks to the former opposition (now government's) refusal to cut its links with "the constitutional order", and thirdly the armed population and their National Committee of Public Salvation. This "independent third pole" declared itself to be completely opposed to the old regime, but showed itself willing to make a deal with the new, Fino government.

Nature detests a vacuum

The situation was now evolving towards a hybrid, intermediary solution, which would delay the final solution of the conflict one way or the other. The ball was in the hands of the new government. The old Berisha regime was seriously weakened, the western embassies had stressed their support and understanding and, above all, the popular movement had no revolutionary leadership. And so, the Fino government took the initiative. A minimal state (police and army) was reconstituted, and the government proclaimed itself to be the saviour of the endangered motherland.

This government is too varied to represent a long term solution. The first public demonstration in support of the new government began with cries of "we want peace," and finished with singing of the Internationale!

Those crazy Albanians again, right? Wrong again! Most of the several thousand demonstrators were members of the Socialist Party. Their feelings might be contradictory, but they are certainly comprehensible. These people, residents of Tirana for the most part, support the government which, in effect, has ended the Berisha dictatorship, but they remain frightened by the great unknown: the Albanian people in arms. This was not the first time in the 20th century that Stalinist bureaucrats, or ex-Stalinist social-democrats, sang the Internationale to exorcise the ghost of a revolution which they see as a competitor, even a danger.

Which way forward?

As we go to press (20th March), the situation in Albania is more confused than ever. Casualties have been very limited: less than 100 deaths during three weeks of insurrection in a Balkan country where everyone is armed to the teeth. But now, for the first time, there is a real danger of anarchy, and total chaos. Hundreds of thousands of people are now motivated by hunger and desperation. To paraphrase the Internationale, "the starvelings have awoken from their slumber." Italian television has convinced people that, in Western Europe, "even the cats eat from silver plates."

People will be ready to do almost anything to satisfy their basic needs, and their (also modest) dreams.

People of good will in western Europe have been troubled by the spectacle of armed insurrection, and the collapse of Berisha's regime. The combination of economic crisis, fraud during the May 1996 elections, and the collapse of the financial organisations running the pyramid schemes stripped the Berisha regime of all legitimacy, and exposed it as the number one enemy of the overwhelming majority of Albanians.

The subsequent social explosion quickly threw up a fairly-well structured popular administration, which challenged the Tirana regime. The balance of forces quickly shifted against the Berisha regime, and it was finally a third force, the leadership of the Socialist Party and the other parties of the old opposition which stepped into the vacuum of power, and took up the dominant position.

After three weeks of general revolt, a precarious equilibrium has been installed. It could break down at any moment. On the one hand, the popular movement cruelly lacks clear perspectives. On the other hand, the remaining financial companies will almost certainly collapse. Meanwhile, Sali Berisha refuses to resign. There is little prospect of stability under the National Reconciliation Government.

Those who wish to defeat the Albanian insurrection will need time, and all the machiavelian skill of the western powers. In the meantime, the armed population may be able to exploit the hesitation of the west, and the Socialist Party bureaucrats, and become even more radical, and more

explicitly plebeian. It may throw up new leaders, men and women who are able to meet the responsibilities and face the challenges which the dynamic of permanent revolution imposes in Albania today.

The Albanian insurrection is not the

result of exceptional circumstances. We may see similar social earthquakes elsewhere in the Balkans, particularly in Macedonia or Bulgaria. Russian nationalist leader Alexander Lebed recently warned that Russia itself could "easily become the Albania of 1998".

End the Tory Nightmare!

1 April 1997, by International Socialist Group

They have privatised and contracted out the public sector to the benefit of their fat cat friends and the detriment of services, working conditions and jobs.

They have undermined the National Health Service, education and every other part of the welfare state. They have grossly increased poverty, homelessness and used unemployment as a deliberate weapon to discipline workers. They have weakened workers' ability to resist all these by introducing eight packages of anti-trade union legislation stripping away almost every right which previously existed and making a legal fightback almost impossible. And they plan more of the same - total privatisation of pensions and the London Underground system, and further curbs on the right to strike. It has to be time to end the Tory nightmare.

The vast majority of workers recognise that the Tories represent the open class interests of the bosses and want to see them out. They will do that by voting Labour and hope that Labour will be at least a little better. They are crying out for a government which tackles unemployment and the deterioration of the welfare state. Socialist Outlook knows that a Labour government led by Blair will not do any of these things of its own free will, but it has never been more important that a Labour government is elected, despite the extent to which Blair has taken it to the right. A fifth Tory term would create widespread despair while a Labour victory would create

higher expectations and new conditions for a fightback.

If elected, Labour leader Tony Blair would immediately face hard choices, such as whether to go into the single currency. A Labour government is committed to building on the Tories' achievements for British capitalism. Gordon Brown, due to be Chancellor if Labour takes government, is committed to carrying out the limits on public spending set out by the Tories, including the limit on public sector pay increases. Labour will continue with much of the Tory programme, its anti-union laws, its attacks on the welfare state, no reversal of privatisations. Even where Labour is committed to better policies, like the statutory national minimum wage, it will take a fight to ensure that it is implemented, and at a level which significantly improves the living standards of the lowest paid.

Whether we like it or not, the vast majority of class conscious workers will vote Labour in the general election (unfortunately, a significant minority will vote Tory or Liberal Democrat). Those who doubt that this is a 'class against class' election should consider what the effect of the election of the Tories for another term would be on the morale of militants. Labour not winning the election would be seen as an endorsement of the Tories, who would feel they could continue their attacks on the working class with impunity, and whole layers of the working class would feel they had no defence against these attacks.

The modest increase in struggle in the last year in the expectation that the Tories are on their way out would be set back to a considerable extent.

While it is the case that Blair has moved Labour's programme considerably further to the right than ever before, the basic nature of the Labour Party has not changed. Despite Blair's worst intentions, the affiliation of the trade unions means the Labour Party is in essence a workers party, even though it has always had a pro-capitalist programme.

We would take issue with those socialists who believe that what is necessary in order to break the working class from its support for Blair is to simply denounce Labour and stand candidates critical of New Labour. While that might make us feel good and attract a small layer who totally reject New Labour, it will have little effect on the vast majority who will see such candidacies as marginal to the central question in the election. That is what happened when they stood in the Hemsworth, Barnsley East and Wirral South bye-elections. Far more productive and likely to gain a hearing in most areas is for socialists to link a call for a Labour vote with both a critique of Labour's policies and building struggles which place demands on Labour around key policies and fights to force a Labour government to carry them out. Workers who, despite all the evidence, expect Labour to deliver something, will relate to that much more than simple denunciation of Labour.

By and large, the job of creating an alternative to New Labour with serious support is ahead of us. There are very few places where candidates to the Left of Labour in the election represent serious forces. Whilst calling for an overall vote for Labour we support some of the most credible and well-placed candidates of the left parties and organisations, the Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Party (ex-Militant Labour) and the Scottish Socialist Alliance.

We support Dave Nellist in Coventry (standing for the SP), Tommy Sheridan in Glasgow (SP/SSA) and Arthur Scargill standing in Newport East for the SLP. Although these organisations are different, and the SLP problematic in the way it was established and has functioned since, this is a recognition both of the base

of support these individuals have in the workers' movement and of the importance of the forces developing to the Left of the Labour Party. The SSA comes out of the radical political situation in Scotland, and the SLP emerges from the rightward march of Blairism.

If Labour wins the election, we can expect conflict between the government and those who elected it expecting Labour to be better than the Tories. Brown's commitment to keeping down public sector pay will not go down well with those workers who have already experienced several years of pay restraint from the Tories. Blair's desire to prevent the trade unions having any real say in Labour Party policy is already causing upset, and is likely to be one of the major issues of debate at this year's trade union conferences.

Not only will the election of a Labour government lift the air of gloom over the working class, it will also release the class from the arguments of their union leaders over the last decade that any struggle would damage the chances of a Labour victory. It will begin to show the limitations of Labour in government and allow socialists the scope to put forward alternative policies to a much wider audience than has been possible in the recent past. Although Blair can expect a certain "honeymoon" period while he is given the benefit of the doubt, struggles will develop against a Labour government from those expecting it to reverse the actions of the Tories. Those who rule out support for Labour in the election either rule out or refuse to relate to such crucial developments.

Elections change little

1 April 1997, by **Arif Azad**

Arif Azad: In one sense the result is an extension of the old order. Nothing has changed for the majority. The huge mandate that Nawaz Sharif [leader of the Pakistan Muslim League] has received was the result of a stitch-up between President Farooq Leghari and the military to the advantage of this pro-establishment candidate. The Muslim League is now the national party of Pakistan and has expanded from its base in Punjab province. It has solid representation in Sindh, Baluchistan and North-West Frontier Province.

The Peoples Party has been reduced to its strong-hold of Sindh province - where the Bhuttos have family connections and are landowners. Even before the election, Sindh's I spoke to sensed a sea-change in attitudes of the Sindh towards Bhutto and her Party. Many of her core supporters deserted her by not voting in the elections at all. [Voter turnout was only 36.36%, down from 43% in 1993].

The Mohajir Quami Movement [party of Urdu speaking migrants from India settled in the urban centres of Sindh] has made a comeback in its fortress of Karachi in Sindh. Benazir Bhutto did the military's dirty work for them by crushing the MQM and 'order' has been restored in Karachi though political and sectarian murders continue. The MQM will form the next provincial government in Sindh with the support of the Muslim League.

There has been an interesting development in Baluchistan. The Baluchistan National Movement was formed only a month before the elections by Ataullah Mengal. He is a regional autonomist and a key figure in the past insurgency movement there, subsequently in exile in London in its aftermath. This new party has won a sizeable number of seats in that province.

In North-West Frontier Province, the Awami National Party (ANP) was runner up to the Muslim League. The

ANP is no longer a regional autonomist party. [1] They know that they can only rule their province with the support of the military and in collaboration with a Punjabi party. They have ditched their commitment to social justice and are now simply a party for the Pashtun people.

Many bourgeois centrist politicians who had previously been pro-military openly criticised the role of the military in the dismissal of the Bhutto government and accused them of rigging the elections to oust them from the scene in a clean-up of politics. Even a leader of the religious party Jamiat-ullami-Islam, which is traditionally pro-military was extremely critical of them. Meanwhile Benazir Bhutto didn't have a word to say against them, mindful she needed their support to save her future political fortune and to protect her family, particularly her husband, Asif Zardari, who is under arrest on corruption and murder charges. [2]

Benazir Bhutto was associated with the struggles against Zia-Ul-Haq's military regime and benefited enormously from the populist legacy of her father's administration and the "pro-poor" rhetoric of the Pakistan Peoples Party. And yet the dismissal of her government by the President on November 5th 1996 was greeted by popular indifference, even enthusiasm...

Some influential columnists and newspaper editors advocated this course of action four or five months preceding November. This strengthened the hand of the President.

Benazir Bhutto was voted out on her record in office. She really disillusioned the whole country. Her government is associated with high inflation. People are groaning under the burden of the rising cost of living. Benazir was perceived as being very arrogant. Even during her election rallies she never apologised for her mistakes and instead denounced the President for dismissing her, at every opportunity. Nawaz Sharif spoke at rallies which were far larger than his rival's. He was contrite about the record of his government while Prime Minister between 1990 and 1993. He seemed to be more in touch with the grievances of ordinary people.

There was also the Asif Ali Zardari factor. Bhutto's husband and his enrichment through corruption was her greatest liability. From Mr. Ten Percent, he became known as Mr. Thirty Percent [his commission on business deals he negotiated using his influence]. She never reined him in and in fact is completely loyal to him. When the President asked her to clamp down on Zardari's business activities, she delivered a snub to him by appointing her husband as Minister for Investment the following day! One of the scandals which contributed to her downfall is "Surreygate".

The Bhuttos are rumoured to have a 350 acre estate and mansion in Surrey, England. Then Zardari imported a stable of horses which were fed on an expensive diet while the poor are scraping by. All this swelled public anger. The press went

to town on these facts. Even die-hard PPP activists were ashamed to identify themselves with the Government. During the election campaign, Benazir was low-key and conciliatory. She probably wants to strike a deal with the new government for her husband's release and was prepared to lose the election for this purpose.

Many members of the PPP believe Benazir should cut her ties with Zardari and concentrate on revitalising the party organisation and return to the populist traditions of her father in the early 1970s. While her government didn't attack the interests of the business class, bureaucracy and the military, Benazir herself said that her dismissal was the result of a conspiracy by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. These institutions are using the rhetoric of "good governance" to criticise the kickbacks and rampant corruption, which reduces the profits of foreign capital. Asif Zardari was a very high profile individual and deeply implicated in all of this and Benazir Bhutto suffered by association.

What has happened to the Islamic fundamentalist parties which were so influential in Pakistani politics and seemed to define the agenda even of mainstream secular parties? The Jamaat-i-Islami boycotted the elections, though the Jamiat-Ullami-Islam did win a few seats.

Ideology has taken second place for most people to the sheer struggle for day to day living. In Pakistan people pay lip service to Islam but very few want an Islamic state. They know the record of fundamentalist movements in areas where they do have influence. Secondly, the new Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif appeals to the same layer that is most supportive of these fundamentalist parties especially the bazaar merchant and the petty bourgeoisie more generally. He has captured this vote. Interestingly the rhetoric of these movements has also changed. They are less strident in their use of Islam as ideology and now focus on social justice questions.

In fact they out-flank the Peoples Party to its left on a number of issues. It is the state of the economy which

pre-occupies people. Many voted for Nawaz Sharif on the basis that as a businessman he would manage the economy well and at any rate he couldn't be any worse than his predecessor!

I am very sceptical that the economy can be turned around by the new regime but that is the popular perception. At present it appears that fundamentalist movements have lost their influence but given Pakistan's history and its *raison d'être* as a state created for Muslims, these parties are not going to go away. Their electoral representation has always been low but these cadre based parties are the best organised. Over the past few years they have expanded their activities throughout the country and in every sector of society. They have cells in the armed forces, in trade unions and in universities. There is a sizeable presence in the Railway workers union and in the Pakistan International Airlines union.

The fundamentalists have moved with the times. When I was in student politics, the student wing of the Jamiat banned students in hostels watching videos, because these would import decadent western values and Indian popular culture or could be pornographic. Now at their rallies they play popular music. Televisions are no longer frowned upon. Like other fundamentalist parties around the world they have a welfare wing which draws them political support. This has brought them into contact with the poor and they are the most vocal on social questions. When as frequently happens the police harass and abuse common people, it is the youth wing of these parties which marches to the police station and demands an end to this misconduct. If the Left doesn't get its act together, unite its forces and rediscover its role as tribunes of the people for economic justice, social justice including women's equality, land reform and so on the Jamiat will reap the benefits.

The western media lavished a great deal of attention on the former international cricketer and lately social activist Imran Khan. They were intrigued by this Oxford University product, socialite and now son-in-law of the billionaire

businessman Sir James Goldsmith. However Khan's Tehrik-i-Insaf (Movement for Justice) polled very poorly.

By highlighting the issue of corruption which was the sole plank of his party's electoral campaign, Imran Khan really played into the hands of the establishment. He was given a lot of air time to call for corruption charges to be slapped on the Bhuttos. In other words he was furthering the agenda of the military. The establishment sees corruption only in politicians because they are public figures. The corruption of the bureaucracy and the military is hidden. People are encouraged to loathe politicians. They are being persuaded to lose belief in the electoral process. This of course can only strengthen the argument for a political role for these unelected forces. Imran Khan had nothing to offer in his political programme. He campaigned on the basis of his personal charisma. He didn't have a team or a vision.

Whatever he may think he is not a man of the people. He is aloof and arrogant. The allegations made about his fathering a child which he has refused to accept as his own also damaged him. He keeps company with the most corrupt individuals in Pakistan and invited many of them to his wedding but at his election rallies he promised to hang the corrupt upside down. He was always going to be a marginal figure and it was only the western media which gave him prominence.

Before the elections the caretaker government created the Council for Defence and National Security. Is this a new institutional role for the President and the Armed Forces?

The Council will act to deflect any demands made by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund for the reduction of the military budget which consumes 40% of national income. All economic policy has to be vetted by this institution. This means they can strike a bargain with multi-lateral lending institutions, to protect their privileges and pass the social costs of the structural adjustment program onto the poor. Another dimension is

that under the aegis of this Council, the President has improved his own standing vis-a-vis the office of the Prime Minister and has concentrated more power in his own hands. There are tensions between the Chief of the Army Staff, General Jahangir Karamat and the President on this score. General Karamat may suspect the President is trying to undermine the role of the military through the Council. The military has certainly strengthened its vice like grip over the country and the Nawaz Sharif government recognises this.

The caretaker government appointed a Pakistani vice-president at the World Bank, Shahid Javed Burki as Special Economic Advisor. This unelected technocrat introduced the economic reform program which has been inherited by the new government.

The World Bank and Pakistani governments have a long relationship going back to the early 1950s when economic policies were framed by the Harvard School of Economics. Harvard university had a scholarship scheme through which it attracted the brightest Pakistani students and trained them. Mohammad Shoaib, during Ayub Khan's regime, was Finance Minister and when he wasn't - he was working for the World Bank. Then came Mahbub-ul-Haq who likewise served military regimes and when not doing so, was attached to either the World Bank or later the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). He was the architect of the first Five Year Plan, Finance Minister, Chairman of the Planning Commission. The two most recent Caretaker governments in 1990 and between November 1996 and February 1997 have been effectively headed by current employees from senior levels of the World Bank.

This has paved the way for the introduction of anti-poor austerity measures which even nominally democratic governments could not afford to bring in. Shahid Javed Burki is also the author of a book on the Zulfikar Ali Bhutto government between 1971 and 1977 which was extremely critical of its economic record. In that book he also argued

that if any democratically elected government tried to revert to the populist policies of that period it would be ruined. Well he finally got his shot at handling the economic portfolio. Burki was shuttling between Islamabad and Washington DC to plead with the World Bank to release more loans for Pakistan which they didn't do. However what they did give him was a blueprint for an incoming government. A few days before the election, Nawaz Sharif was given a briefing by Burki and his team on this economic plan and left certain that he would be expected to stick to and implement it once in office.

The foreign debt is around US\$30 billion and debt-servicing consumes 45 per cent of the budget. The Caretaker government removed state subsidies for staple foods and necessities. The price of sugar increased four times in those few months, from Rs. 10 per kilo to Rs. 31 per kilo. [60Rs. = 1 US dollar] The price of ghee [cooking oil] has reached Rs. 80 per kilo. Similarly with wheat flour, milk-powder etc. and cement, electricity and gas. The cost of transport from bus fares to rail fares. You can see the effects of these policies on the faces of the poor. They are so hard pressed that they find it difficult to even breathe.

Privatisation will be accelerated by the new government. How are trade unions responding?

Since 1990 there has been large-scale privatisation. Nawaz Sharif's political and business friends profited by this and likewise under Benazir Bhutto, her friends have been the major beneficiaries of these sell-offs. There hasn't been widespread opposition to privatisation. Many trade unionists see the floating of the Allied Bank of Pakistan as a model. The bank workers and management bought a majority stake in this bank and its financial situation has improved. Trade unionists see this as a future strategy. A way to protect jobs while maintaining profitability.

Trade unions were prominent in the 1960s with the expansion of the industrial working class and a left wing movement. If trade unions confine themselves to wage

bargaining and do not understand the ceaseless clash between Capital and Labour, then they cannot go forward as a political movement. Trade unions and the Left supported Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and propelled him into power. However their militancy was too threatening to him and he curbed them. However I am optimistic that they are beginning to revive themselves.

There is a small core of independent trade unions and left wing activists who are trying to mobilise on anti-privatisation issues and they have formed a loose network which is a promising start. Aside from this there was also an electoral coalition formed at these elections based upon progressive trade unionists and left wing groups including the Pakistani affiliate of the Committee for a Workers International. It stood on a clearly workers agenda.

Historically the Pakistani Left [3] has always been entangled with bourgeois parties and more recently in the Peoples Party. We are at an embryonic stage but this is a welcome break and

the foundations are being laid for the future. The road ahead of us is long. General Zia-ul-Haq not only crushed popular opposition but also depoliticised the youth. This generation knows nothing about politics and left wing ideologies. Instead they understand politics only along ethnic, clan and regional and religious sectarian lines.

Key dates

1947 - 1957 Multi-party system with Muslim League and Republican Party.
1958 - 1969 Field Marshall Ayub Khan's martial law regime.

1969 - 1971 Ayub Khan forced out by popular movements and hands power to new army chief, General Yahya Khan

1971 -1977 Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party comes to

power.

1977 - 1985 Bhutto ousted in military coup and subsequently hung to death. General Zia-ul-Haq becomes Martial Law Administrator

1985 - 1988 Non-party elections. Zia becomes President. Martial law is lifted.

1988 - 1990 Zia dies in plane crash. Benazir Bhutto's PPP comes to power.

1990 - 1993 Benazir Bhutto's government dismissed by President. Caretaker government of Moeen Qureshi takes over. When elections are held, Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League elected.

1993 -1996 Nawaz Sharif's government dismissed by the President. Benazir Bhutto returns to office. November 1996, PPP government is dismissed by President. The care-taker government is headed by Prime Minister Meraj Khalid though many believe that President Farooq Leghari holds real power.

1997 Nawaz Sharif is elected.

Prejudice, Poverty and Aids

1 April 1997, by Ken Davis

Although these global estimates are far more realistic than the official figures the World Health Organisation used to record, they are probably underestimates. As access to health services in Sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia deteriorates, more and more people become ill and die without treatment or diagnosis. Few countries can maintain comprehensive databases of HIV infection or AIDS mortality, and few can afford effective surveillance testing.

How Many People Are Affected?

For political and economic reasons, many countries are minimising the

dimensions of their problem. Indonesia's official cumulative AIDS mortality is 66, but recently academics at the University of Indonesia published research revealing up to 30,000 unrecorded AIDS deaths each year.

Life expectancy in several countries with well established epidemics has already begun to fall. Life expectancy in Sub-Saharan Africa will decrease from an average of 62 to 47 years by the end of the century. In Zimbabwe, life expectancy for women is expected to fall from 58 years to 30-35 years by the year 2000.

The interaction of HIV infection with tuberculosis (TB) has emerged as a dangerous and key trend in the second

decade of the epidemic. TB itself is easily transmissible, particularly to non-HIV positive children and grandparents in the domestic environment. TB can reactivate quite soon after HIV has started to impact on the immune system. The underlying HIV infections often remains undiagnosed in overworked TB wards and clinics. For example, while reports only 235 AIDS cases so far, foreign and local TB specialists maintain that the overwhelming majority of the 13,000 adult TB deaths in the last year have been in people with HIV.

Resources for HIV testing in the Third World have been deployed with little regard as to how testing will benefit affected communities and individuals. Much testing takes place through de-

linked surveys, where pregnant women, blood donors or soldiers are tested, often without explanation, and without individuals being told results or offered support. The effect of knowing, as did the pre-massacre Rwandan army, that over 60% of the group will develop a fatal illness, can be disastrous. In some countries, such as Cambodia, those found positive even in individual diagnostic tests are not told, since it is regarded as socially wrong for a doctor to give such bad news to a patient.

Discrimination against people with HIV

AIDS testing usually means screening out HIV+ applicants for housing, medical aid schemes and insurance, military and police recruits, potential public and private sector employees, applicants for training, and medical patients.

In some provinces of South Africa, one in five applicants for housing loans simultaneously receive news of their positive HIV result and rejection of their loans. One in ten young men joining the Thai Army are sent home with no ongoing support after their rejection because of HIV.

Several countries use HIV testing as a means of repression against migrant workers, refugees, those suspected of drug use, prostitution or homosexuality. Indefinite detention, or forced relocation are the penalty for testing positive. In 1993 HIV+ Burmese sex workers deported from Thailand were detained and given lethal injections by their country's military regime.

Even in countries with very high rates of HIV and AIDS, there may be very few people publicly known as HIV positive, and those suspected of HIV may be subject to extreme measures of rejection and persecution in their communities. Supportive self-organisations of people with HIV are well-established in some countries of East Africa, and in Thailand, but are at best incipient in most other Asian and African nations.

Organisations of people with HIV in Asia and Africa, dedicated to exercising leadership in AIDS education, or to fighting for basic rights, are even more fragile, despite the efforts of the Global Network of People with HIV (GNP+), the International Council of AIDS Service Organisations, and the repeated manifestos of international conferences since 1983.

The socio-economic impact

The social and economic impact of the epidemic on several Sub-Saharan African and South Asian countries is already profound. The direct costs of the epidemic include costs of education, testing, the increased use of healers, medicines, clinics and hospitals by people with HIV-related illnesses, funeral and mourning expenses, care of the surviving and now-destitute elderly and orphans. UNICEF estimates there are already 1.5 million orphans with parents lost to AIDS in the most affected African countries.

HIV related illness is an extra burden that threatens to overwhelm the health systems of almost every nation in Africa and Asia. A local hospital or clinic will use scarce resources on treatable conditions, rather than deploy medicines and beds for care of patients that cannot be cured. If a person sick with something they believe to be HIV related knows that the local clinic or hospital can offer no treatment or cure, they will not travel or spend money uselessly, and will not even become an HIV statistic. For most of the affected communities, the direct cost of caring for a family member with AIDS is greater than the annual income, and just one AIDS death can plunge the family into irredeemable poverty. In countries where people rely on medical aid or insurance schemes for their health care, families already affected by HIV cannot afford to pay the premiums, and people testing positive for HIV are excluded from voluntary and employment-based schemes.

Because of its predominantly sexual transmission, HIV strikes

disproportionately at those of working age. In some countries it has threatened the urban, trained and skilled labour force. In other areas, AIDS has removed tens of thousands of people from agricultural labour. Few countries can afford a drop in productive labour or the reversion of farming methods to below-subsistence levels, as children and the elderly take up the burdens previously born by the parents and young adults.

HIV incurs disastrous indirect costs to the economy through the absence from work, the overall loss of labour productivity and the difficulty in replacing skilled labour. There is a significant loss in school attendance in families with an adult illness or death. Discriminatory responses to people with HIV in the education and health systems and in the workplace also carry an economic burden, through unnecessary screening, premature dismissals and industrial disruption.

In Thailand HIV may cost 20% of the GNP by the year 2000. Kenya's adult HIV rate of 14%, has caused an estimated 15-25% cuts in profits to non-capital intensive businesses over the last 10 years. In Tanzania, the cost of replacing teachers lost to AIDS over the next decade is estimated at USD\$40 million. Zambia relies for 90% of its export earnings on its copper mines (which are now being privatised at the insistence of the IMF), yet almost 60% of the mines' skilled employees have HIV. In 1991 the Zimbabwe Trade Union Congress estimated that over one fifth of its membership had HIV or AIDS.

At a family level, the death of young adults from AIDS disrupts the generational flow and socialisation patterns. At a national level, AIDS deaths undermine the central infrastructure, with the most expensively (often foreign) educated being disproportionately affected and increasingly difficult to replace with experienced cadre. All eleven of Zambia's air traffic controllers have died of the disease. This unwelcome 'turnover' of the highest echelons can lead to national destabilisation. Some UN bodies have made HIV rates a key factor in their assessment that some nation states in Africa are becoming "unviable".

Many nations fear that international awareness of their high rates of HIV will affect investment and tourism. The first example of this was Haiti, where the discovery of high rates of AIDS in 1983 resulted in the decimation of tourist income, then that country's major earner.

Civil wars and UN interventions have exacerbated the spread of HIV, with troop movements, sex for money and rape. The UNTAC intervention in Cambodia resulted in an upswing of commercial sex transactions and HIV incidence, with infection of local women and foreign soldiers and officials.

The experience in Mozambique was similar but worse. The escalation of South Africa's HIV epidemic has occurred only in the 90s, much later than the countries to its north. The country now has an estimated 2.4 million people with HIV, which represents an unparalleled socio-economic challenge. The costs of an epidemic of this scope, though well-predicted, were not factored against the virtually-abandoned Reconstruction and Development Program promises of housing, jobs, health care and education, nor have they been accommodated within the current neo-liberal framework of policy making in the new South Africa.

Failure of international programs

In 1994, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that if global spending on STD and HIV prevention were increased to (USD) \$1.5-2.9 billion per year, that is ten to fifteen times greater than actual spending, 10 million new HIV infections could be averted by the year 2000.

UNAIDS, whose objective is to coordinate the efforts of six UN agencies in combatting AIDS, was launched one year ago. With continuing conflict between the various bodies, lack of commitment by national governments, and without the promised funding, it has been able to

channel only minimal resources to HIV programs in the poorest countries, barely able to assemble infrastructure for its own offices, staff and consultants.

Within bilateral aid packages, a very small percentage actually provides resources for care or prevention at a community level in the most needy countries. For most donor countries, 90% of aid money is spent at home, purchasing testing kits or advice on training, needs assessments, planning or evaluation from profiteering pharmaceutical or development consultancy corporations. At the increasingly large and expensive international Aids conferences, those on A-list circuit of "technical advisers" grow ever richer, while the rhetoric grows more hollow, and the inaction by governments more criminal.

The recent success of anti-retroviral combination therapies among many people with HIV in the imperialist nations throws into stark relief the almost complete lack of access to any but the simplest treatments for symptoms or common opportunistic infections for people with HIV in the Third World. The lives of people with HIV are being squeezed out in a vice. On one side are the very opulent profits of the major drug companies, (Glaxo-Wellcome, Ciba-Geigy, Roche, Abbott, etc), and on the other, the enforcement by the imperialist financial institutions of debt repayments and the structural adjustment plans.

Precisely at the point at which HIV emerged as a large scale epidemic in Sub-Saharan African nations, governments were implementing — as demanded by the IMF — major cuts to public health spending, and dismantling primary health care services. In Zambia per capita annual expenditure on health fell in the 1980s from US\$23 to \$5. Where only user-pays or private health care exists, AIDS victims will only present themselves at a very late stage of the disease, and after the main breadwinner dies, families affected by HIV will be unable to access any care.

While there has been some progress, hopes for effective, cheap and available vaginal viricides, female

condoms, and vaccines are a long way from being fulfilled.

Women's rights

Sexual inequality is a key factor behind the HIV epidemic.

Since more than three-quarters of HIV transmission world-wide occurs during heterosexual sex, the rights of women are a key determinant in for the epidemic. In the long term, women in Africa and Asia will bear a greater AIDS burden than men. In response to HIV, many men select younger partners. In Zimbabwe, five times more women than men under the age of 20 are HIV positive.

It is utopian for AIDS campaigns to encourage women to negotiate condom use with their male partners outside of the context of struggles against rape, sexual and domestic violence, female genital mutilation, struggles for sexual and reproductive self-determination, and for reforms to marriage, divorce, inheritance and property laws, and struggles to increase access by women to health services, basic and technical education, and employment opportunities.

Commercial Sex

AIDS has occasioned increased repression of women in the commercial sex industry in many countries. Governments and religious NGOs have assumed that women and girls "trapped" in prostitution can be tested, gaoled, retrained or relocated and the problem of infecting heterosexual male clients with "innocent families" will be eliminated. But none of the moralistic or anti-prostitution programs have been able to cut the overall numbers of commercial sex transactions. Every time the Cambodian, Vietnamese, Thai or Filipino governments have declared war on the brothels, they have reopened in increased numbers soon after. For every ex-prostitute retrained in craft and sent home, a younger woman replaces her on the street.

Much more effective in curtailing HIV incidence have been projects which

assist sex workers organising for their rights, educating each other, increasing access to non-judgemental sexual health services, standing up to employers, and enforcing safe standards in their working lives. Sex worker organisations have achieved inspiring successes in cities from Nairobi and Durban to Mumbai (Bombay) and Phnom Penh.

Third World gays struggle for survival

Sexual transmission of HIV between men makes up a relatively small part of overall HIV incidence in the Third World, but amongst homosexual and transgender sub-cultures in many countries, infection rates are devastating.

In many cities, organisations of sexual minorities pre-date AIDS. In Burma, China, Malaysia, Taiwan, Singapore and other countries tentative gay rights organising grew out of youth upsurges in the 80s for democratic rights. But in other Asian and African nations, the advent of HIV has allowed activists from homosexual and transgender communities to claim space and resources. [4]

Traditional transgender identities and sub-cultures are undergoing transformations because of imperialist economic, ideological and cultural expansion, but also because of threats of decimation due to AIDS. The *leiti* in Tonga have their own association under patronage of the royal household. Indian *hijras*, *baklas* in Filipino barrios, *waria* in Indonesia and *kathoeys* in Thailand receive small international grants for AIDS peer-education. From Soweto to Suva, drag beauty contests are being transformed into health education rallies.

Gay organisations have gained some level of official recognition, at least with government health departments, through being able to initiate grassroots AIDS education and support, and provide input to AIDS policy development and planning. Examples of this limited legitimisation

are Citra Usada in Bali, Gaya Nusantara in Surabaya, Bombay Dost, Pink Triangle in Kuala Lumpur, Library Foundation in Manila, and FACT in Bangkok. In other centres, such as Fiji, Hong Kong and Singapore gay activism has been able to clothe itself in the garb of general AIDS service NGOs.

Last year's Ninth Conference on AIDS and STDs in Africa, held in Kampala, allowed a ground-breaking meeting of lesbians and gay men to establish an information network across dozens of African countries.

The added urgency of organising against HIV among homosexual sub-cultures, and the need for more open discussion of sexual behaviours has led to demands for the repeal of colonial laws against homosexual activities still retained in countries such as India, Singapore, Zambia.

In China and Vietnam, local pragmatism about AIDS prevention has allowed small, and discrete gay groups to form in major cities. In Beijing local health officials worked with a small gay group to produce a leaflet about HIV and safe sex to be distributed to men meeting for sex in parks.

Golden Triangle?

The "War on Drugs" makes HIV spread faster.

As rural populations in the Mekong are forced to cut opium production, scarcity causes local modes of consumption to switch from traditional smoking, to injection of the "value-added" heroin, often with shared and contaminated injecting equipment. The most dynamic axis of the epidemic is a South-East Asian "corridor" stretching from North East India, across Burma (where 70% of drug injectors are HIV positive), Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Yunnan and Vietnam. This HIV axis thrives on two economies, the trafficking in opiates and in women.

International and domestic political pressures have led several countries to intensify repression of drug-using groups. In Vietnam, the "struggle

against social evils" — officially reinvigorated this month in the lead up to the lunar new year "cleansing" period — targets drug abuse, prostitution, pornography and gambling as the unwanted side-effects of the reintroduction of capitalism.

The strategy in Ho Chi Minh City, where most HIV in Vietnam is centred, has been to round up all drug users and sex workers, confining them to two large "rehabilitation" and detention centres. Inmates are HIV tested, and those found positive cannot be released. Many are newly infected through sexual or drug using activities inside the centres. For the majority of people detected with HIV in Vietnam, the future holds only incarceration until death.

Yet also in Vietnam there have been experiments in allowing the training and development of peer education programs for injection drug users, sex workers and gay men — though more recently these peer groups have become more controlled by local Party cadre. There are trial needle exchange schemes in three districts of Hanoi, and pilot projects in care of HIV positive drug injectors in their family homes.

Similar "harm minimisation" and peer-organising projects for drug injectors have been operating in Nepal, Manipur, Cape Town, Malaysia and Thailand. Even in Yunnan, where China's HIV epidemic is centred, highly repressive responses alternate and co-exist with some more effective and pragmatic interventions.

To effectively minimise HIV transmission through drug injection requires the abandonment of repressive measures against drug users, and the civil space for users to organise themselves.

Censorship

Northern governments and international institutions boast of the resources they have committed to prevention and education campaigns worldwide. The reality is that, in country after country, explicit information about HIV transmission has been prevented by censorship.

Governments as diverse as Vietnam, Indonesia and Zambia say that condom promotion offends national morals, and that all resources should be devoted to promotion of

abstinence, monogamy and family values.

Effective AIDS education includes solidarity with people with HIV. It also requires the widest possible

distribution of empowering sex-positive messages. Unfortunately, religious influence over government and NGO programs often prevent or hinder this.

Vulnerability and resistance

1 April 1997, by **Marc Nectar**

When did Act Up come to France?

Marc Nectar: Act Up France was born in 1989, inspired by Act Up New-York, formed two years earlier by the gay writer Eric Rameur. Since then, Act Up Paris has been linked to the momentum of the Gay Pride movement, since here in France AIDS is still an epidemic which mainly affects the gay community (40% of the HIV positive are homosexuals). Our goal is to put pressure on the authorities and the institutions on all questions linked to the epidemic.

Back in 1989, the authorities talked as if "queers and drug addicts" were the only people affected by AIDS. And we were left to sort things out by ourselves. A range of organisations like Aides and Vaincre le Sida were formed, to look after the sick, and fight for better access to health care and against discrimination. Act Up was founded by people who wanted to politicise the AIDS debate. We are not a support group for those with HIV, but a political association. Our strategy is pressuring the powers-that-be using non-violent action and the media.

Act Up has organised a whole series of short actions ("Zappings"), which aim to shock public opinion, and generate the images and reactions which will oblige the media to discuss the problem in the terms set by us. We were determined to stop the pathetic "oh how sad that these poor people are dying so young" treatment the issue was receiving. Our most spectacular action was the December 1993 action at Place de la Concorde. We also played an important role in

exposing the scandal over contaminated blood products. At first, the haemophiliac associations were reluctant to link their "innocent" infection with ours. That changed when we were able to explode the whole scandal.

In 1990, Act Up occupied Notre Dame Church, right in the heart of Paris, to denounce the complicity of the religious hierarchy in homophobia, and the Catholic Church's refusal to approve the use of condoms to protect people against this epidemic.

We work in a completely democratic way. We have learned from the mistakes of many of the groups created after May 1968. Particularly the various homosexual organisations, which became nothing more than talking shops. Act Up is a much more structured, disciplined association, with clear responsibilities and a leadership. But also with an open weekly meeting in which all members are encouraged to participate. Over the last seven years, attendance has fluctuated between 50 and 300. But every Tuesday there has been a meeting.

We only have three full-timers, for the technical secretariat. The rest of the work is done in permanent commissions or workshops, which allow members to deepen their understanding of a particular theme, and choose what kind of action they want to take. Act Up is a mainly homosexual association, created in the homosexual community. But this doesn't make us the mirror of a ghetto. There is no ghetto, except in some peoples' heads. Act Up is

sensitive to all the marginal communities: drug users, immigrants, prisoners and so on.

Take prisoners. The prison protests and strikes of the 1970s led to little change, because no-one in society really supported the prisoners. Today, Act Up is ready to use its energy and its prestige to relay prisoners' concerns, and help find solutions to some of their problems. Act Up will help communities which the state ignores completely.

Act Up challenges a number of established ideas. Notably the nature of scientific power. AIDS emerged at a time when science seemed able to solve all our problems, and society looked forward to total mastery over our environment. AIDS changed all that. Science found itself helpless, confronted with a new, mutant virus and a new epidemic. 16 years later, science has still not fully understood the mechanisms of AIDS. This challenges the legitimacy of the scientific and medical establishment.

In the first decade of AIDS, doctors knew no more than their patients. Indeed, it was often the patients who taught the doctors about HIV, and the various treatments being developed, particularly in the USA. The patients gained a real power which, today, is being extended to other pathologies. This is profoundly modifying the relationship between doctor and patient, though of course the process is still fragile and embryonic. The patient is more and more a partner in the healing process, an associate in the treatment programme, and no longer just "patient" in the sense of

calmly waiting for a more powerful party to decide to act.

AIDS hasn't just changed this in philosophical terms, but in research practice too. AIDS is the only pathology where the patients are linked to the research process on a daily basis, in France through the National AIDS Research Agency (Agence nationale de recherche contre le Sida). In the USA too, no new treatment is applied without the agreement of the patient. Nor is any new treatment put on the market without the agreement of the associations of HIV sufferers.

Act Up has shown that we can make the authorities take our concerns into consideration, and modify their behaviour.

The new "tritherapy" (combination of drugs) has led some experts to claim that the epidemic is under control?

Therapeutically, things changed considerably in 1996. We are in a new, uncertain phase. One year ago, the US Congress suggested a new treatment, combining "antiproteases" operating on different parts of the virus, in different ways. It seems that, in combination with existing treatments for HIV, this new therapy in many cases improves the health of HIV+ people considerably, allowing them to regain strength, and, of course, to live longer.

The media and public opinion have embraced the antiproteases news very enthusiastically, and are crying "victory!" a little too soon. Act Up recognises the importance of antiproteases, and the improvements they seem to have brought. But we are also concerned about problems of resistance to this new treatment. Clearly the new treatment is unsuitable for some patients. So we still need a range of treatments to become available, to compensate for those which, tomorrow or the day after, may prove to be ineffective.

There is a risk that people will become less militant because of this new treatment, even though many questions are still not solved. Issues like access to treatment, the social security provision for HIV+ people in

marginal situations, HIV+ prisoners, the lack of social recognition for homosexuality, the pressing need to de-criminalise drug use, and begin helping drug addicts.

If the public really begins to think that the epidemic is over, we will find it much more difficult to continue our mobilisation, and to deal with a number of social questions which are at the very heart of the AIDS crisis.

The central issue for me today is vulnerability. Contamination happens where there is vulnerability. If we don't understand this vulnerability, we can't explain why, despite the prevention campaigns, despite the fact that most people know that you must use a condom or a clean needle if you take risks, the number of new infections has hardly dropped in the last 12 months. There were 4,796 new cases of HIV in 1996, only 300 less than in 1995.

No "superdrug" therapy will solve the AIDS crisis, until we deal with this vulnerability, with the fact that individuals and social groups are vulnerable to infection. Homosexuals are vulnerable because it is hard, in France and elsewhere, to admit to being homosexual. Drug users continue to get sick because they are seen as criminals, rather than people who suffer. In Africa, women are more vulnerable to AIDS because they lack weight in society.

What does Act Up say about drug use?

The central question is this: why are drug users 30% of the HIV+ population? If so many drug users are contaminated, it is surely because we have a juridical framework which defines drug use as crime and drug users as criminals. As a result, drug use can only be secret. Within this secret world, little attention is paid to public health messages from outside. And only since 1995, 15 years after the epidemic began, have French NGOs been allowed to distribute clean needles to drug users.

For years now, Act Up has been arguing for the installation of automatic syringe distributors in the appropriate locations. Local politicians avoid making the decision, for fear of

upsetting their reactionary voters. There is only one public syringe exchange/distribution machine in the whole of Paris! The only town which has made a real effort (eight machines) is Marseilles, which has a right wing mayor.

Act Up proposes:

- the abolition of the 1970 law criminalising drug use, and the introduction of a real prevention policy, directly addressed at drug addicts, and recognising these people are fully responsible adults, not children or criminals. Let's stop thinking that public health materials about dirty needles has to be like a comic strip!
- improving drug addicts' access to health care. The special health services created for drug users are certainly useful, but why are they less well funded and equipped than the rest of the health service?
- challenging the Ministry of Health's authoritarian substitution programme. The Ministry tries to bring drug addicts "back into line," using AIDS as a means of controlling addicts, by providing tranquilliser products. These substitutes could be much improved. Act Up demands that a range of products, and substitution methods be made available, covering the whole range of drug products actually in use.
- the distribution of heroine, under medical supervision. For some drug addicts, this is the only solution. France is behind a number of other countries. Even Margaret Thatcher approved a more pragmatic policy.

The new tri-therapy will never be commercialised in the third world...

On World AIDS Day, 1st December 1996, you could see that the media, the authorities, the voluntary sector and public opinion are less concerned about AIDS than they used to be. People are saying, more or less, that the epidemic is over in the northern countries, and that the only big problems are in the south.

This very "politically correct" discourse usually urges us to do more for HIV patients in the third world, who represent 95% of all sufferers. In reality, AIDS is no more a priority in

the south than in the north. The French Ministry of [foreign] Co-operation recently decided to stop prioritising the struggle against AIDS in its African programmes. Why? Above all because of lobbying from the right-wing within the governing coalition(not even the far right). These politicians want France to prioritise aid to obstetrics and maternal care, rather than AIDS as such. Obviously, these are important questions,since there are many HIV infections from mother to child.

But the new orientation is based on side-tracking AIDS. Same pattern in the north. The most reactionary parts of the right are trying to stop the

public health system from talking about AIDS even here.

Why the shift? Quite simply because these new therapy rely on administering several expensive drugs in combination. No country, no aid programme official wants to admit that sufferers in the south will never receive the most effective treatments which have been developed in the north, and that the North will never make the necessary huge funds available to introduce treatments like AZT in the South.

The only remaining solution is to de-prioritise AIDS. If public opinion

pressure fades, the embarrassing question of why these treatments are not available in the South will not have to be faced in the same way.

At Act Up we say that "the priority is everywhere, or it is nowhere!" When one tries to de-prioritise AIDS in public health programmes in the North, part of the reason is to solve base financial questions in the South. This is scandalous and criminal. We must keep shouting out: "the AIDS epidemic isn't over!"

Interviewed for International Viewpoint by Sonia Leith. Previously published as "On nous parle d'espoir!", Inprecor #410.

A non-condom solution?

1 April 1997, by **Lise Thiry**

The early evidence of Nonoxylol 9's anti-HIV effects came from studies using test tubes, and cats. The results on Kenyan prostitutes (the perfect test group —very sexually active, but not using condoms) were less encouraging. Nonoxylol 9 caused ulceration in the vaginal mucus, thus increasing the risk of infection. The dose they were given, was 5-10 times stronger in Nonoxylol 9 than commercial spermicides used in the USA. Luckily, the women in the test group did not develop HIV any faster than the women in the control group, who had used a neutral product instead of Nonoxylol 9. A similar trial in Cameroon using a lower dose of Nonoxylol 9 (2-3 times stronger than commercial spermicides) did seem to reduce the risk of HIV infection for prostitutes.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to create an effective antiviral spermicide, which is not a vaginal irritant for women who have sexual intercourse more than once every 24 hours, unless one uses more expensive bicyclam drugs. (Laurent Belec, in Transcriptase n 46, June 1996) Research is being hindered by the

inflexible position of the World Health Organisation, which is demanding not just total safety, and the stability of the treatment in tropical conditions, but even that the new cream "must be suitable for application well before the sexual contact, so as not to affect the spontaneity of the relationship," and "must respect the women's desire to procreate." Two preconditions which condoms fail.

Meanwhile, every 25 seconds a woman somewhere in the world is infected with HIV. Surely it's time for a new, less-than-perfect treatment, alongside the less-than-perfect alternatives: the condom and fidelity. Obviously, the availability of vaginal sprays and creams with an anti-HIV effect is no miracle liberation of women. In some cultures, women associate sexual relationships very closely with their role as potential mothers. The ideal anti-HIV product for these women would be one which killed the virus but let the sperm swim through! Perfect sperm, not weakened or damaged by the activity of the anti-HIV agents. No biologist is ready to develop such a product!

Lower genetic resistance?

The evidence is there, even if we hesitate to say it aloud — some people have repeated high-risk encounters, without catching HIV. 10% of the spouses of haemophiliacs who caught HIV through contaminated blood products (but did not know of their sickness, so did not use condoms with their partners) caught HIV in the year following their partner's infection. The others did not. And many continued to be HIV free during years of unprotected sexual relations, in the period before their partners' sickness was diagnosed.

Some people catch HIV after one unprotected sexual exchange. Others have sex hundreds of times, without catching their partner's infection. It was originally thought that this was because there were a variety of strains of HIV, some more, and some less contagious. But it is increasingly suspected that in fact humans have a variable personal resistance.

While many of Nairobi's prostitutes

have contracted AIDS, because their clients refuse to use condoms, others have been on the game for years, without any sign of HIV. It has proved impossible to infect these women's blood with HIV, even in laboratory tests. Similar results have been observed among groups of homosexual men with high risk lifestyles.

The strange thing is that this resistance only applies to recent strains of HIV. These "lucky ones" are still vulnerable, in laboratory tests, to older strains of HIV, collected and archived when the disease was first observed.

One explanation is that these people's resistance to HIV has been acquired by a "vaccination" contact. Other researchers suggest a genetic

explanation. It seems that genetic factors could only 'protect' 1% of the European population. And the "lucky" genes seem to be completely absent in the African population.

There is still a lot of work to do. No-one knows why such a genetic immunity should have developed, millennia before AIDS appeared. Nor is it clear if the apparent immunity of a minority of the population is absolute, or only covers certain strains of the HIV virus.

Mother and child

Pregnancy does not increase the threat of AIDS among HIV-positive women who eat properly. In one Kenyan study, 17% of HIV positive pregnant women had a severe vitamin A deficiency, and 32% passed their

infection to the foetus. Among mothers with adequate vitamin A levels, "only" about 7% of foetuses became infected. A comparable study in Houston, Texas reported that 13% of all foetuses of HIV-positive mothers became infected. In other words, the high infection and contagion levels in Africa are not due to some primitive practice, but to poverty.

Vitamin A deficiency is also responsible for a higher rate of contamination through breast-feeding. 100% of vitamin-deficient women in the same Kenyan study had traces of HIV in their milk, compared to 38% of women without the deficiency. In other words, the rate of HIV contagion is inversely linked to overall nutrition. Just as with tuberculosis, the poor diet of the poor is one of the main factors behind their vulnerability to HIV.

The cocktail hour

1 April 1997, by Tavis Barr

According to the mainstream American press, 1996 was the year when AIDS became a chronic manageable illness. "The end of AIDS?" asked a Newsweek cover suggestively in December, while AIDS researcher David Ho, [5] found his way on to the cover of Time as AIDS research poster boy "extraordinaire" and Time's "Man of the Year."

The cause of all this hoopla is a new class of drugs called protease inhibitors, which, when taken in combination with a regimen of previously available drugs called reverse transcriptase inhibitors, keep HIV at often undetectable low levels for lengthy periods of time, possibly several years. These combination therapies can consist of up to 20 pills a day, and are referred to euphemistically as "cocktails." For people who are sick, such cocktails probably extend life expectancy by several years.

Ho's attainment of poster boy status

was spurred not so much by any leading role he held in the development of these drugs [6] as his advocacy of a "hit hard, hit early" treatment strategy. The idea behind such a strategy is that the earlier you counter an HIV infection, the more likely you are to contain the virus entirely inside blood cells; if you can contain it for a couple of years, those cells will die off, and the infection may disappear completely.

High risk

In practice, "hit hard, hit early" is an entirely unproved concept. Researchers made the same claims about AZT (the first reverse transcriptase inhibitor) when it came out. Subsequent research showed that although AZT makes people with AIDS healthier for longer, it is so toxic that it does not increase people's life expectancy. Those who were "hit hard" and "hit early" with AZT actually

saw their life expectancies decrease.

The new cocktails are a bit more promising in this regard: They do appear to be able, in some patients, to disappear the virus for almost enough time. But just as these cocktails are dramatically stronger than AZT, the risks associated with a "hit hard, hit early" strategy are dramatically more dangerous. Already, more than ten percent of new HIV infections in the US are resistant to AZT, and these resistant strains of HIV are more powerful and more deadly than the non-resistant ones.

Strains that are resistant to AZT are also more resistant to other reverse transcriptase inhibitors, and even somewhat to protease inhibitors, a trait known as "cross resistance." The resistance and cross-resistance created by drug cocktails is manifold higher.

This means that people who "hit hard, hit early" and fail will be left in a few

years with an infection that is more virulent, resistant to other available drugs, and probably resistant to many future drugs as well. AIDS service providers already report a new potential outbreak of resistant HIV as men on drug cocktails, whose viral load sometimes drops to undetectable levels, believe that they are not contagious and begin having unsafe sex with — and infecting — their partners.

Huge profits

What "hit hard, hit early" does unambiguously do is boost drug company profits, by putting people on expensive drugs who may not need them. And these profits have been enormous: The first protease inhibitor to be released, Hoffmann-LaRoche's Invirase (saquinavir), was priced at \$7,000 per year. Then, Abbott released Norvir (ritonavir) at \$8,200. Finally, Merck chose to distribute its protease inhibitor, Crixivan (indinavir) through a single pharmacy retailer, Statlander's, which marked up the drug 38% to over \$6,000 per year.

A co-ordinated effort by several AIDS activist organisations of fax zaps, meetings, and letter writing got Statlander's to agree to negotiate about the price. Finally, after four ACT UP/New York members were jailed for posting signs on Statlanders' store in a largely gay area of New York's Greenwich Village, the company agreed within 24 hours to lower the price to the still-ridiculous amount of \$5,000 per year.

The prices of Invirase and Norvir have not yet budged, so that someone on a regimen of several drugs can pay up to \$30,000 for a year's supply. Not surprisingly, Merck saw a 1995 after-tax profit rate of 22%, Abbott of 16%, and Hoffmann-LaRoche of 22%, even after amortising their research and development expenses for these drugs. These leading pharmaceutical companies are in full marketing mode, holding off on newly-developed life-saving drugs (like so many new model computer chips) until the current ones have run out their profitability.

Glaxo-Wellcome, the manufacturer of AZT, has already developed a new

reverse transcriptase inhibitor known as "1592," which is supposed to be ten times as effective as AZT and dramatically less toxic. But the company does not want to begin large-scale (Phase II) clinical trials for "1592" until demand for AZT is exhausted.

How much is your life worth?

With these kinds of prices, drug companies have excluded all but the wealthiest Americans, and those lucky enough to have good insurance, from effective, up-to-date treatment. [7] There is a joint federal-state program, known as the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), which provides drug assistance to middle-income people with AIDS. However, in 35 of the 50 American states, ADAP does not cover protease inhibitors (coverage was saved in New York only through the dramatic and persistent interventions of AIDS activists), and is already running bankrupt in states that do cover them.

The federal government was forced to inject \$167 million more into ADAP midyear in order to pay its share of the costs for protease inhibitors, but even so, the ADAP Working Group (a Washington-based industry/community lobby group) estimates that this money will fall \$270 million short of demand. Without help from ADAP, Americans with AIDS are forced to spend themselves down to extreme poverty levels, so that they qualify for the social health program, Medicaid.

Meanwhile, AIDS is increasingly a disease borne by the poor and people of colour; new CDC estimates suggest that seven of ten newly-infected gay men are black or latino, and the numbers are even higher among IV drug users and heterosexuals.

To protest such high drug prices, ACT UP held a march last October in Washington, DC., on the weekend that the AIDS quilt was being displayed. In a deeply moving political funeral, protesters threw the ashes of about twenty-five people on the White House lawn to protest the federal

government's lack of action. In response to ACT UP's actions, outgoing National AIDS Policy Coordinator Patsy Fleming promised, "I would be happy to meet with [drug companies] about lowering their prices."

However, she did not indicate whether Vice President Al Gore brought up price gouging when he met with pharmaceutical manufacturers twice last year. Nor has she since announced any concrete action on the topic.

Far less noted, but just as profound, is the ideological coup that the new drugs have created for the corporate research agenda. Only two years ago, it was widely accepted that the government had pursued high-tech drugs at the expense of a basic research agenda, while promising but unprofitable treatments were widely ignored. Studies of the effects of various vitamins and nutrients were not widely performed until 1994, while cheap clinical trials of widely available substances that some people with AIDS were using, but had not been clinically tested. [8] There was an effort in 1995 to restructure entirely the Office of AIDS Research (which was made acutely more difficult when right-wing senator Jesse Helms used this effort as an excuse to attempt to abolish the office), and move more funds into basic research (the way HIV causes AIDS is still not entirely understood) and broader treatment studies.

AIDS-activists had been able to seize the government's failure as an opportunity to gain a great deal of publicity for some points they had been making all along: How the research agenda is governed by corporate interests, how its decisions are based on profitability and not the needs of people with AIDS, and how a more participatory program, directed by a wider range of doctors, epidemiologists, and people with AIDS - and notably not by corporate interests and representatives - could solve some of these problems.

Two years later, with drug cocktail makers promising miracles, AIDS activism has been largely reduced to issues around drug pricing and access,

while larger questions of the research agenda will be ignored for as long as the current wave of high-tech drug lasts.

The purpose of this research agenda has been clear for some time. To quote ACT UP/Boston Member Rich Rochon, who gave the opening presentation for the VIIIth International Conference on AIDS in Amsterdam in 1992:

"Often I'm asked if I believe a cure will

come and I strongly say "No!". I do believe that we, and I hope it's we [it wasn't; Rich died a year later], will see AIDS progress into a chronic, manageable disease. Just because I believe this does not mean that I'm not fighting for a cure. In my theory, imagine how much money a single drug company would make if it comes up with a cure. Imagine the profits. Imagine how much several drug companies can make by coming up with treatments for infections, keeping people with AIDS alive, allowing us to

continue to get sick and be treated with drugs on an ongoing basis. Imagine the profits."

As long as drug pricing and access to treatment are the immediate and pressing issues, activists will be fighting for them forcefully. But when the glory of the current set of high-tech drugs begins to fade, we must again raise the larger issues of who controls AIDS research and where those people are taking it.