The Future of AIDS

Nicholas Eberstadt

GRIM TOLL IN RUSSIA, INDIA, AND CHINA

HIV/AIDS IS A DISEASE at once amazingly virulent and shockingly new. Only a generation ago, it lay undetected. Yet in the past two decades, by the reckoning of the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), about 65 million people have contracted the illness, and perhaps 25 million of them have already died. The affliction is almost invariably lethal: scientists do not consider a cure to be even on the horizon. For now, it looks as if AIDS could end up as the coming century's top infectious killer.

At present, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, though global, is overwhelmingly concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. Although this situation has exacted a terrible human cost, the rest of the world has been largely unaffected by Africa's tragedy. Things will be very different, however, in the next major area of HIV infection. Eurasia (which for the purposes of this essay is considered to be the territory encompassing the continent of Asia, plus Russia) will likely be home to the largest number of HIV victims in the decades ahead. Driven by the spread of the disease in the region's three largest countries—China, India, and Russia—the coming Eurasian pandemic threatens to derail the economic prospects of billions and alter the global military balance. And although the devastating costs of HIV/AIDS are clear, it is unclear that much will be done to head off the looming catastrophe.

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WORLDS APART

TODAY HIV/AIDS is decimating sub-Saharan Africa. According to UNAIDS, as of late 2001 more than 28 million of the world's roughly 40 million HIV carriers lived in that region, and about 9 percent of all sub-Saharan inhabitants between the ages of 15 and 49 were HIV carriers. (In parts of the continent, the rate is far higher: adult infection exceeded 30 percent in four countries last year, and in Botswana it was near an almost unimaginable 40 percent.) UNAIDS' best guesses put AIDS-related mortality in sub-Saharan states at over two million in 2001—suggesting that the disease accounted for every fifth death. So far perhaps 20 million sub-Saharan people have perished in the pandemic.

Africa's AIDS catastrophe is a humanitarian disaster of world historic proportions, yet the economic and political reverberations from this crisis have been remarkably muted outside the continent itself. The explanation for this awful dissonance lies in the region's marginal status in global economics and politics. By many measures, for example, sub-Saharan Africa's contribution to the world economy is less than Switzerland's. In military affairs, no regional state, save perhaps South Africa, has the capacity to conduct overseas combat operations, and indeed sub-Saharan governments are primarily preoccupied with local troubles. The states of the region are thus not well positioned to influence events much beyond their own borders under any circumstances, good or ill—and the cruel consequence is that the world pays them little attention.

Circumstances are rather different in the world's other area of rapidly spreading HIV infection. Eurasia is home to the great majority of the world's population; five out of every eight people on the planet live there. It has substantial economic weight—its combined GNP in 2000 of $15 trillion exceeded that of either the United States or Europe. Militarily, it is home to four out of five of the world's million-strong armies, and four of the seven declared nuclear states. Thus, unlike in sub-Saharan Africa, unexpected shocks there—such as the unfolding HIV/AIDS epidemic—will have major worldwide repercussions.

In absolute terms, HIV/AIDS is already firmly established in Eurasia. According to conventional estimates, more than 7 million of the region's inhabitants were HIV carriers in 2001. And according to those same

official estimates, it took less than a decade for sub-Saharan Africa's HIV population to leap from 7 million to 25 million.

It must be emphasized that there is currently no reliable method for accurately forecasting the long-term trajectory of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nevertheless, the prospect of tens of millions of Eurasian HIV cases—and AIDS deaths—in the decades ahead is by no means fanciful. To the contrary, absent a cure or a vaccine, it is quite possible that the center of the global HIV/AIDS crisis, in terms of absolute numbers, will shift from Africa to Eurasia over the coming generation.

Despite uncertainty about the future direction of the disease, a number of basic facts are already clear. First, even without approaching the infection rate of sub-Saharan Africa, HIV/AIDS is poised to exact a staggering human toll over the next quarter-century in the region's three pivotal countries—Russia, India, and China. Second, the economic costs of the disease in these three countries will be vastly larger than they have been in sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, given how the disease spreads, some key Eurasian populations will be harder hit than others—and some regional governments will prove less competent than their neighbors (and competitors) in handling the crisis that ensues.

The spread of HIV/AIDS through Eurasia, in short, will assuredly qualify as a humanitarian tragedy—but it will be much more than that. The pandemic there stands to affect, and alter, the economic potential—and by extension, the military power—of the region's major states. And the disease will do more damage to some big countries than to others. Over the decades ahead, in other words, HIV/AIDS is set to be a factor in the very balance of power within Eurasia—and thus in the relationship between Eurasian states and the rest of the world.

THE NEW RUSSIAN ROULETTE

TO ASSESS the implications of HIV/AIDS for Russia, India, and China in the years ahead, one must begin by getting a clear sense of the situation today. Unfortunately, the available data on HIV infection in these countries are somewhat tentative, in large part because the highest authorities in Moscow, New Delhi, and Beijing are unable (and unwilling) to monitor their respective HIV epidemics closely and continuously. Even UNAIDS figures are vetted by host governments, raising the possibility

that the results have been negotiated downward. Nevertheless, thumbnail sketches of the HIV situation in each country are still possible.

By all accounts, Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic has exploded in recent years; the only dispute is over how much. Over the past 15 years, Russian medical authorities have registered a cumulative total of about 200,000 HIV-positive patients. Independent estimates, however, are much higher—ranging from a UNAIDS figure of 700,000 carriers in 2001 to the Russian Academy of Medicine's total of one million in mid-2002, to U.S. intelligence sources' approximation of one to two million carriers today. These latter figures imply an infection rate two to three times that of the United States.

Although the first HIV infections within the Russian Federation occurred before the end of communist rule, the demise of the Soviet state set the stage for the disease's rapid spread. The upheavals of Russia's ongoing transition—economic and social dislocation, increased poverty, new freedoms (including greater opportunities for geographic mobility, extramarital sex, prostitution, and drug use)— transformed the country into a far more conducive setting for the spread of HIV/AIDS. Health authorities first noted HIV in port cities such as Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg, but the infection apparently then rapidly made its way to other urban centers, including Siberian cities such as Irkutsk. Current indications are that it is now a truly nationwide phenomenon.

Russia's HIV/AIDS epidemic can be understood by looking at those groups at highest risk. As in most Western countries, there is a homosexual component to the spread of the disease, with men who have sex with other men emerging as an identifiable vector of HIV transmission. There is also a drug-use vector, in which intravenous (IV) drug users contaminate other users or their own sexual partners. This method of transmission appears to be particularly important in Russia: current press reports, for example, suggest that Moscow alone may contain almost one million drug users, including perhaps 150,000 needle-using heroin and cocaine addicts.

The infection appears to be spreading rapidly through these populations, but the scope of an HIV/AIDS "breakout" into the general population will depend to a large degree on risk behavior in the non-drug-using heterosexual population. Although accurate figures about sexual practices are hard to procure, basic demographic data suggest

that previous constraints on behavior are eroding: the proportion of out-of-wedlock births, for example, has soared since the collapse of communism. Russia has also experienced an explosive increase in the incidence of curable sexually transmitted infections: official figures point to a 33-fold jump over the course of the 1990s. (This figure should not be taken literally, owing to the unreliability of both past and present health reporting, but it is nonetheless indicative.) Beyond this, Russia's flourishing level of prostitution factors importantly in the spread of HIV/AIDS among heterosexuals, particularly due to the substantial overlap between commercial sex workers and IV drug users.

Russia's prison system acts as a carburetor for HIV, pumping the illness out into the general population.

Russia's transition from communism to capitalism has also coincided with a tremendous increase in criminal activity, a trend with important implications for the future of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. One factor is the spread of behavioral risk through small-scale crime, such as prostitution and IV drug use. At least as important, however, is the Russian Federation's prison system. Currently Russia incarcerates almost one million convicts at any given moment. Public health care, however, is notably absent in the Russian penal system; prison camps are consequently virtual incubation dishes for diseases such as drug-resistant tuberculosis and HIV. Unlike under the communist-era gulag, moreover, nowadays prisoners are released on a regular basis: in 2000, about 300,000 convicts were granted liberty. Most of them head back to their native towns, and a significant proportion of these former convicts are HIV positive. Russia's prison system, in other words, functions like a carburetor for HIV—pumping a highly concentrated variant of the infection back through the general population.

The immediate prognosis for the Russian HIV/AIDS epidemic depends largely on the preventive policies the government pursues. Unfortunately, it is only a slight caricature to say that Moscow seems to have settled on a posture of malign neglect toward the gathering problem. The Russian government is spending only $6 million a year of its own resources on HIV/AIDS programs. That sum pales in comparison to the more than $6 billion the United States devotes each year to its

HIV problem, and surreal as this may sound, the Russian total is less than a third of the $20 million that Moscow pledged just this past summer to the UN's worldwide campaign against HIV. Much of the anti-HIV work in Russia today is being funded not by Russians, but by foreign nongovernmental organizations such as Médicins Sans Frontières and George Soros' Open Society Institute.

Beyond its own seeming lack of interest in tackling HIV/AIDS, the Russian government has also prevented outside organizations from financing related health activities—most conspicuously, World Bank–proposed programs to combat tuberculosis, a disease associated with HIV infection that is now endemic throughout the country. Further complicating the struggle is Moscow's insistence that legal authorities have access to HIV test results. People who test positive for HIV and are thought to have contracted the illness through illegal drug use are subject to prosecution. This rule creates a powerful incentive among citizens to conceal and misrepresent their HIV status—and further fans the spread of the disease.

A TRYST WITH DISEASE

IN INDIA, as elsewhere, current numbers are uncertain. UNAIDS has suggested that about four million Indians were HIV positive in 2001—a figure that squares with New Delhi's official estimates. In August 2002, however, Health Minister Shatrughan Sinha publicly warned that the true numbers might be much higher, owing to the sketchy disease-surveillance capabilities of several large Indian states. This view is corroborated by a U.S. National Intelligence Council estimate that India has between five and eight million HIV sufferers.

HIV was first diagnosed in India in the mid-1980s. As in Russia (and in most other countries), HIV first emerged in India's urban centers; Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras), and Bangalore were among the early high-risk cities. Studies suggest that the disease has spread through two geographic pathways: first, along the main trunk roads that serve as the transport network for this enormous country, and second, along the border regions near Burma, where drug use is widespread.

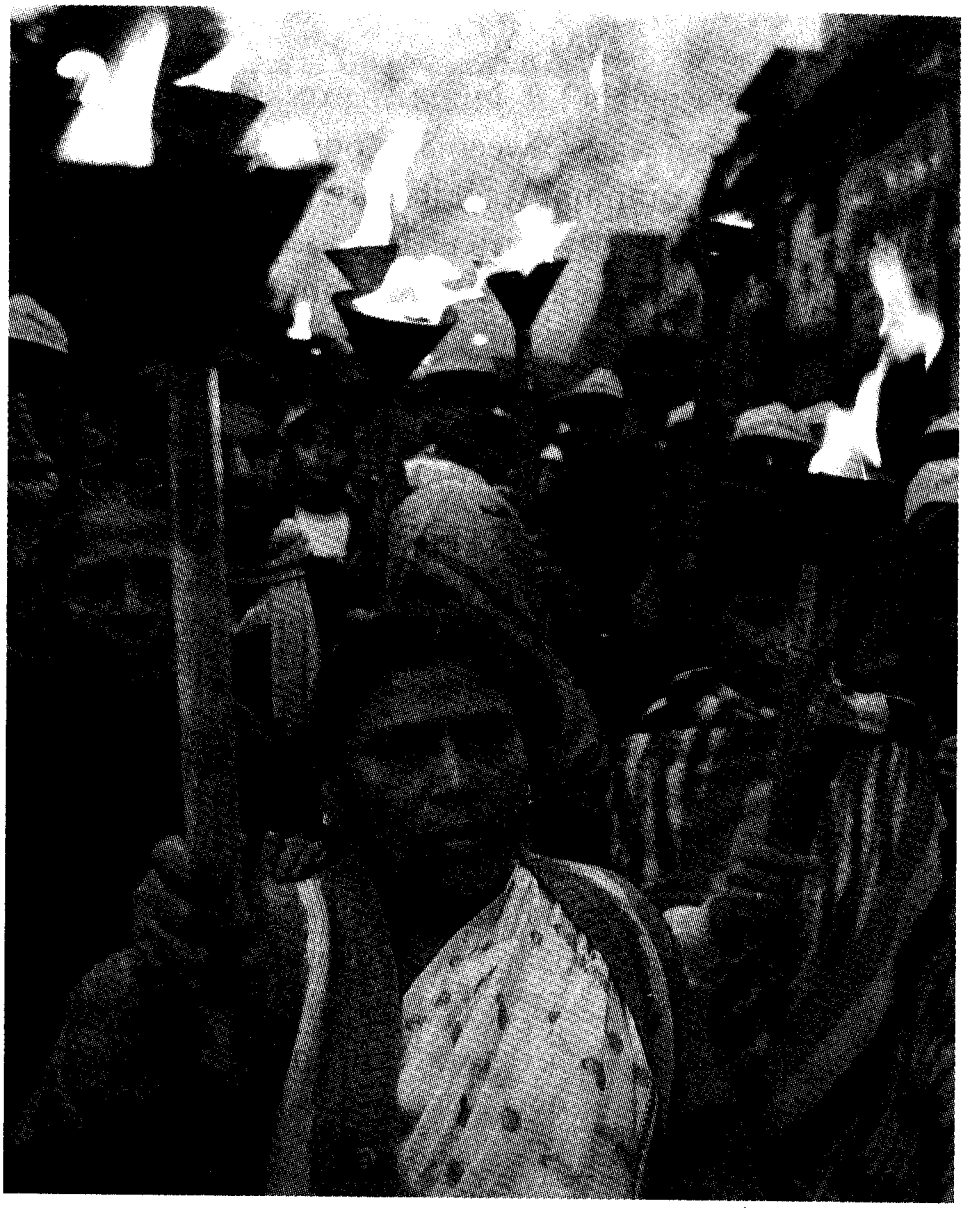
Firm conclusions are difficult since epidemiological surveys (which calculate the incidence, distribution, and control of disease) are still

very limited in scope and scale in India. In most of the country, moreover, people are still reluctant to discuss behavior that contributes to the spread of the disease. Homosexual sex, for instance, is an apparent vector for HIV transmission in India, but public sensibilities preclude a discussion of this factor. Drug use has also grown over the past decade, but is mostly confined to the border with Burma. Reports indicate, however, that most of the Indian HIV/AIDS epidemic today is heterosexual—and is transmitted by commercial sex workers and commercial truckers. (Prostitution in India appears to be widespread: in the early 1990s, Indian social scientists estimated that 2 million prostitutes were at work in the country, and demand has only grown during the intervening decade.) Furthermore, if current accounts are accurate, many monogamous women in India are being infected by husbands having extramarital affairs. And given the high levels of illiteracy among women in India and the taboos concerning sexually transmitted diseases more generally, very little information seems to be available to India's adult female population about HIV risks.

The Indian government has responded to the country's HIV epidemic unevenly. New Delhi announced a National AIDS Control Program in 1987, but follow-through was haphazard and the government's own anti-AIDS organization devoted a considerable portion of its energies to arguing that outside groups were overestimating the prevalence of HIV in India. India is currently in the second phase of a ten-year government program for combating the spread of HIV. India's federal system, however, grants wide latitude to states, and these have shown varying levels of interest (and competence) in dealing with the problem. In April 2002, New Delhi announced a nationwide target of "zero ... new [HIV] infections by 2007." But barring a miracle cure, that goal is utterly fanciful—and only raises questions about the seriousness of the effort overall.

GREAT LEAP BACKWARD

OF THE THREE COUNTRIES under consideration, the uncertainties are greatest for China. The overwhelming majority of HIV cases in the country are undocumented and untreated: as of 2001, a cumulative total of only 30,000 HIV cases had been registered. Consequently,



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

Torch song? Sex-trade workers protesting for better HIV healthcare, New Delhi, December 1, 1997

estimates of the total current cases and the number of new cases of HIV in China rely heavily on guesswork.

In August 2001, health authorities in Beijing announced that 600,000 Chinese were HIV positive as of 2000. A little later, in July 2002, UNAIDS estimated that the total number of people living with HIV/AIDS in China was 850,000—a figure with which Beijing, at the time, concurred. Just two months thereafter, however, the Chinese Health Ministry raised the official estimate to one million.

Other sources suggest that the total may be even higher. (Indeed, according to some claims, the province of Henan alone might already

have 1.2 million HIV carriers.) A June 2002 UN report suggested that China's HIV population was between 800,000 and 1.5 million people. The U.S. intelligence community, for its part, estimates that China has one million to two million HIV carriers. Nor is this the upper boundary of informed guesswork. In June 2002, an unnamed UN official told *The New York Times* that there could be as many as 6 million HIV cases in China today; if that claim proves accurate, China would currently have the largest HIV population of any country in the world.

Given China's enormous population, these huge HIV numbers still translate into relatively low rates of prevalence: a million HIV carriers would mean a rate of about 0.13 percent; 2 million, about 0.25 percent; and even with the astronomical figure of 6 million, China's HIV prevalence rate would be only somewhat higher than the current 0.7 percent rate in the United States. But whatever the true rate is, there can be no doubt that totals are rising swiftly. Chinese authorities and UNAIDS, for instance, both suggest that the prevalence of HIV in China has been increasing recently by about 20–30 percent per year; the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also note that at current rates the number of victims could double in 30 months.

HIV infection in China is growing at a rate of 20 to 30 percent a year.

HIV is currently transmitted in China by three main routes: extramarital heterosexual intercourse (abetted by the ongoing expansion of China's commercial sex business), illicit IV drug use, and the sale of unsafe blood. This latter factor is in many respects particular to China and reflects the realities of China's ongoing economic transition. With the demise of the rural commune system and the attendant disintegration of public health care in the Chinese countryside, both patients and doctors needed new means of financing rural health care. One such method was the sale of blood or plasma by impoverished farmers to pharmaceutical concerns, clinics, or unregulated agents called "blood heads." These transactions typically took place without the benefit of fresh, disposable needles. Officially encouraged through the early 1990s, this trade in blood was outlawed in 1998—yet it still continues.

The Chinese HIV epidemic appears to be predominantly heterosexual in nature, and the risk of HIV infection is disproportionately high among

the rural poor. High-risk subpopulations include IV drug users, buyers and sellers of blood, and commercial sex workers. Larger at-risk groups may include the so-called floating population (the more than 100 million migrants from rural areas seeking opportunity on the fringes of Chinese urban life) and the "unmarriageable males" (the rising number of young men in China who, due to the country's growing gender imbalance, have no realistic prospect of finding a bride). Although epidemiological data on HIV risk factors for China are spotty, there is also no doubt that behavioral mores are rapidly changing. One telling indication is that between 1985 and 2001 the registered incidence of sexually transmitted infections in China soared by more than a hundredfold.

Until very recently, Beijing's response to the mounting HIV crisis was, at best, peripheral. Despite many warnings from public health experts, China's political leaders seem to be in denial. In September 2002, news reports revealed that the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee had ordered a study of the nation's HIV situation (apparently the first ever such study initiated by the government). This past summer the Chinese government also began cooperation with the U.S. National Institutes of Health to monitor the epidemic. But open discussion of HIV in China is still not officially permitted. In particular, the issue of HIV-tainted blood remains taboo—perhaps because of the regime's arguable complicity in the gathering tragedy. Research on the blood problem continues to be discouraged; activists who bring the problem up continue to be jailed. Unfortunately for the government, an epidemic cannot be censored—and unfortunately for China, suppressing information about HIV/AIDS only makes matters worse.

THE BOTTOM LINE

FOR ALL THE SHORTCOMINGS of available information about HIV in Eurasia, several facts are clear.

First, regardless of the sources one prefers, enormous numbers of people are already infected with HIV in Russia, India, and China. If one trusts UNAIDS estimates, the total for the three countries already exceeds 5.5 million; if one prefers the U.S. intelligence community's statistics, the collective figure may be as high as 12 million.

Second, in each of these countries the continued rapid transmission of HIV is assured and is poised to "break out" into the general population. Russia and China in particular seem to have special potential "epidemiological pumps" for exposing broad segments of their populations to HIV risk—in the former, the national prison system, and in the latter, the prevalence of HIV-tainted blood transfusions combined with the newfound mobility of the rural poor.

Finally, none of the governments in question has pursued effective public health measures to prevent the spread of HIV. To the contrary, each of these governments has taken at best a halfhearted approach to stemming the HIV epidemic. Taken together, these facts strongly suggest that the HIV/AIDS crises in Russia, India, and China are only just beginning. But how far will these crises go—and what will be their economic and political consequences?

In seeking to predict the future course of HIV/AIDS, there is much we still do not know or understand. Although scientists have exhaustively analyzed the genetic makeup of the virus, the public health community knows far less about its spread—the very human demographic, sociological, and behavioral factors that account for its grim progress through the world. Indeed, as *The New York Times* medical correspondent Lawrence Altman M.D. noted in early 2001, "HIV's toll has vastly exceeded the most pessimistic report issued earlier in the epidemic, and the misjudgment largely reflects gaps in knowledge about HIV and AIDS." For now, modeling the future of the HIV pandemic is at least as much art as science; intuition counts no less than technique.

To consider what may yet happen in Eurasia, we need to be able to explain what has already befallen sub-Saharan Africa. Twenty million deaths into Africa's AIDS catastrophe, the medical and public health literature remains curiously vague—even euphemistic—about exactly how HIV spread so fearsomely fast through the region. In broadest outline, however, Africa's HIV disaster is evidently due to a collision between ecological risks (prevalent malnutrition and a heavy preexisting burden of infectious diseases, both of which impair the body's ability to fight disease) and behavioral risk (more specifically, sexual transmission patterns and specific sexual practices that raise the odds of contagion).

Conversely, it is worth noting why HIV has made relatively limited inroads into the populations of wealthy Western countries. This seems

to be due to their favorable "ecological" advantages (better nutrition and minimal endemic disease fortify their residents' immune systems), their particular "behaviorial" dispositions (risky practices, such as drug use and prostitution, have not proliferated catastrophically), and public health infrastructures that have successfully contained potentially lethal risk factors.

Given what is known about the ecological and behavioral HIV risks in Eurasia, it seems safe to suggest that China, India, and Russia today are susceptible to distinctly greater HIV/AIDS risks than are the affluent Western countries—but distinctly lower risks than those in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Where Eurasia will fall between these two poles is not yet clear, but expert opinion has already hazarded some predictions. China's health minister, Zhang Wenkang, warned last year of 10 million HIV infections by 2010; the head of UNAIDS, Peter Piot, has set the figure at 20 million. The former figure would correspond with an HIV prevalence of 1.3 percent among adults; the latter figure would suggest 2.5 percent. For India, the U.S. intelligence community has predicted 20 million to 25 million HIV carriers by 2010—numbers consistent with a prevalence rate of 3–4 percent. And in Russia, that country's leading AIDS authority, Dr. Vadim Pokrovsky, expects 5 million HIV sufferers by 2005, corresponding to an HIV prevalence rate of 6 percent among adults. U.S. intelligence estimates run as high as 8 million by 2010, implying a virtually sub-Saharan infection rate of 11 percent.

Eurasia faces lower HIV risks than Africa, but distinctly higher ones than Europe.

With these figures in mind, it is possible to map out prospective paths for HIV/AIDS in Russia, India, and China over the next quarter-century, using demographic and epidemiological modeling techniques. The assumptions behind any model drive its results—and so any projections can only be illustrative. And from what we know about the record of past HIV/AIDS projections, no one should expect this exercise to be profoundly prescient. But such modeling can nonetheless help to clarify thinking, for it has the virtue of internal consistency.

At the risk of making eyes glaze, let me briefly review the components of this "model." After all, I do not want to seem to be pulling results out of a magical black box.