AIDS activists arrested in India

Rohit Sharma *Mumbai*

India's health activists are outraged over the arrests of nearly a dozen AIDS activists belonging to the non-governmental organisation Sahyog. The AIDS activists have been charged with obscenity and rioting.

Of the six activists still under arrest, four were being held under the National Security Act in the northern hilly region of Uttarakhand in Uttar Pradesh state. Rioting broke out in the region around mid-April as the local print media published details about a report, *AIDS and Us*, brought out by Sahyog in Hindi.

The report, published last September, looked at prevalent sexual practices, including having more than one sexual partner and instances of incest; very low level of awareness; and other

risk factors related to contracting HIV infection or to developing AIDS in the rural areas of the Almora district. It also highlighted excessive use of injections and blood transfusions without proper sterilisation.

The critics took exception to the explicit sexual language in the booklet. They charged the activists with destroying the image of the people of the region, portraying them as promiscuous and practising high risk sexual behaviour.

Most of the inhabitants are migrant labourers and remain away from their families for long intervals. On 20 April, Sahyog offices were attacked by mobs and their staff members beaten up. Later on, 11 members and sympathisers of Sahyog were arrested; some were released on bail.

Given the fury of the mobs and public sentiment, Sahyog issued a statement issuing an unconditional apology and promising withdrawal of the report, but the district adminis-

Demonstrators protest about arrest of AIDS activists

tration banned their work in the area. The work of Sahyog was supported by the Chicago based MacArthur Foundation.

"We are concerned about the hurt to the community," said Poonam Muttreja, country coordinator of the MacArthur Foundation in New Delhi, "but we believe that in a democratic society the best response to such con-

troversies is debate and dialogue instead of arrest and imprisonment," she added. Ms Mutterja said that the work of Sahyog activists has been evaluated independently three times and found to be extremely positive.

Several non-governmental organisations feel that the presentation of the report should have been more cautious. □

Proceedings start against former chemical warfare chief

Pat Sidley *Johannesburg*

The Health Professions Council, South Africa's statutory registration body for health professionals, has finally instituted preliminary proceedings into the behaviour of cardiologist Wouter Basson, who led South Africa's secret chemical warfare programme in the apartheid era.

Dr Basson is on trial for murder and fraud, and South Africans have been horrified by the daily accounts of the bizarre and cruel behaviour meted out to apartheid's opponents, including the administration of a poison allegedly devised and supplied by Dr Basson.

Dr Basson remains registered as a doctor with the Health Professions Council, and when he is not in court he continues to practise as a cardiologist, employed by the state in a public hospital in Pretoria.

He was suspended earlier from his post as a South African National Defence Force cardiologist. His patients are reported to like his good bedside manner.

But fellow health profession-

als are questioning his continued employment. Requests to the council last year to establish why he continued to be registered drew the response that the council could act only when the trial ended.

The accounts of his behaviour have been given by state witnesses, who have been given indemnity from prosecution. The council has now begun the task of inquiring into his behaviour at the same time as the public is beginning to question why these self confessed murderers and torturers are being granted indemnification from prosecution.

They did not apply for amnesty during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's hearings into human rights abuses in the apartheid era and face no trial for their actions, it would seem.

Among the details has been evidence of the disposal of bodies of members of Swapo (South West African People's Organisation) off the Namibian coast—dumped from helicopters during

South Africa's war in Namibia while it occupied the territory.

Apparently too squeamish to continue to kill the members by strangling them or hitting them, members of the security forces injected into their spines a substance (believed to be a muscle relaxant that led to suffocation) to kill them before pushing them from the helicopters. The substance and syringes were allegedly supplied by Dr Basson.

Mr Johan Theron, a former soldier, told the court: "On our first flight the dart thing did not work and a prisoner started struggling with me. Realising that it was a situation of life or death, I put a plastic cuff around his neck and strangled him."

"This was after I thought he would die quickly, but it took a full 15 minutes of kicking and wetting himself before he died. I had to cut the cuff from his neck."

Further allegations against Dr Basson include the devising of a toxin to spike beer, which was supplied to Eastern Cape taxi drivers, and the production of a substance to lace tea, which was given to a policeman's colleague who was deemed to be a problem.

Dr Basson was also alleged to have devised poisons to place on the tip of an umbrella. □

Milburn attacks doctors' private pay

Helen Morant *BMJ*

The health secretary, Alan Milburn, has criticised consultants for profiting excessively from private work, describing the practice as one of the perverse incentives operating in Britain's NHS. "Consultants on maximum part time contracts earn nearly as much from the private sector as from the NHS," he said.

Mr Milburn, who was speaking to an audience of health service managers at the Royal College of Surgeons last week, asked: "Why is it that despite large increases in consultant numbers over the last few decades, the average time people have had to wait has remained pretty constant?"

He expressed concern about the consultant contract, saying that it did not reward the hardest working doctors. He also attacked the culture of deference and hierarchy that was still present in the NHS. □

Full story in News Extra at bmj.com