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World Health Organization holds conference on AIDS

Montreal — More than 15,000 people gathered Sunday for the 5th International AIDS Conference, a high-powered scientific meeting that has expanded to take a closer look at the human side of the devastating disease.

Kenneth Kaunda, president of the African nation of Zambia, was scheduled to deliver the keynote addess and call for a worldwide educational campaign to halt the deadly spread of acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The World Health Organization estimates 5 to 10 million people are currently infected with the AIDS virus and predicts that if current trends continue, that number could triple by the year 2000.

Kaunda, whose nation has been hit hard by AIDS, has said that he thinks the disease should be talked about "as openly as we discuss malaria."

"We want to show people how AIDS might be controlled by having good behavior towards each other. These are issues that should be discussed openly," Kaunda said.

The human immunodeficiency virus or HIV, which causes AIDS, is spread by sexual or blood-to-blood contact, such as intravenous drug users sharing needles. It can also be passed on from an infected mother to her baby.

The stated theme of the Montreal conference is "The Scientific and Social Challenge" of AIDS, and the gathering will attempt to put research into the social dilemma of AIDS on equal footing with biomedical work.

About one-third of the 5,500 research presentations will deal with social, psychological or public health issues.

In fact, a human dimension of the AIDS epidemic has grabbed most of the headlines in advance of this year's conference.

Canada and the United States both came under attack for visa restrictions that could have been used to prevent people with AIDS from attending the conference. About 10,000 delegates and about 5,000 journalists and business representatives were expected for the meeting.

Both U.S. and Canadian officials issued formal assurances last month that people with AIDS or infected with the AIDS virus will be allowed to attend the meeting.

The United States also revised its rules to allow such people to seek visas for other conferences, on business, for medical treatment or to visit relatives.

However, many AIDS activists and the World Health Organization remain concerned about travel restrictions for such people, and WHO will review the situation at a special meeting in Geneva later this year. — (UPI)

MALI — CARE worker Lisa Nichols (R) discusses nutrition with children and their teacher in the West African country.

CARE worker is on the job

On first take, you might assume Lisa Nichols is an investment banker or a hard-driving entrepreneur. She's young, well-groomed and obsessed with her work.

On the job up to 80 hours a week, she calls it "the most important thing" in her life. She can't remember the last time she went shopping or to the theatre, and she met all of her friends at work.

Nichols works in the West African country of Mali, not Wall Street.

Her neighbors in the flat, treeless land on the southern rim of the Sahara Desert are among the poorest people in the world.

Her tiny 3-room house on the outskirts of Bamako has no air conditioner or indoor plumbing.

"My job isn't glamorous, and it will never make me rich, but I love the challenge of it," says Nichols, who manages health care services to 250 Malian villages for CARE, the international relief and development organization.

"I'm glad that what I do helps people, even saves their lives, but I don't think of myself as exceptional."

Indeed Nichols had plenty of competitors for her job in Mali, despite occupational hazards that include blinding sandstorms and 120 degree heat.

"I know this flies in the face of a lot of stories about greedy yuppies," says Patrick Shields, an employment manager for CARE; "But even without advertising, we get about 200 resumes a week from experienced people with postgraduate degrees who want to work with the impoverished in the Third World."

"During the famine in 1985, I managed a truck fleet for CARE that was hauling grain," says Nichols.

"Working shoulder to shoulder with the male drivers in a Muslim country where women do not give orders to men wasn't easy, but eventually we became a solid team."

Today, she trains local women in prenatal nutrition, hygiene, sanitation and the importance of immunizations. Those women then pass the information along to their neighbors.

"My goal is not to fix every problem myself," Nichols says, "but to pass along the skills the people need to fix it themselves. If I do it right, my job eventually becomes superfluous."

Ethiopia seeking talks with rebels

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — The Ethiopian parliament opened debate Monday in a bid to draw Eritrean rebels into talks to end a 28-year-old civil war.

The talks would be the first since 1985.

The chairman of a parliamentary committee set up to study the prospects for peace proposed that the parliament mandate the government to open talks with any group willing to talk "without any pre-conditions."

The 762-member national Shengo, Ethiopia's parliament, took up debate of the proposal during an extraordinary one-day congress in Addis Ababa Monday afternoon.

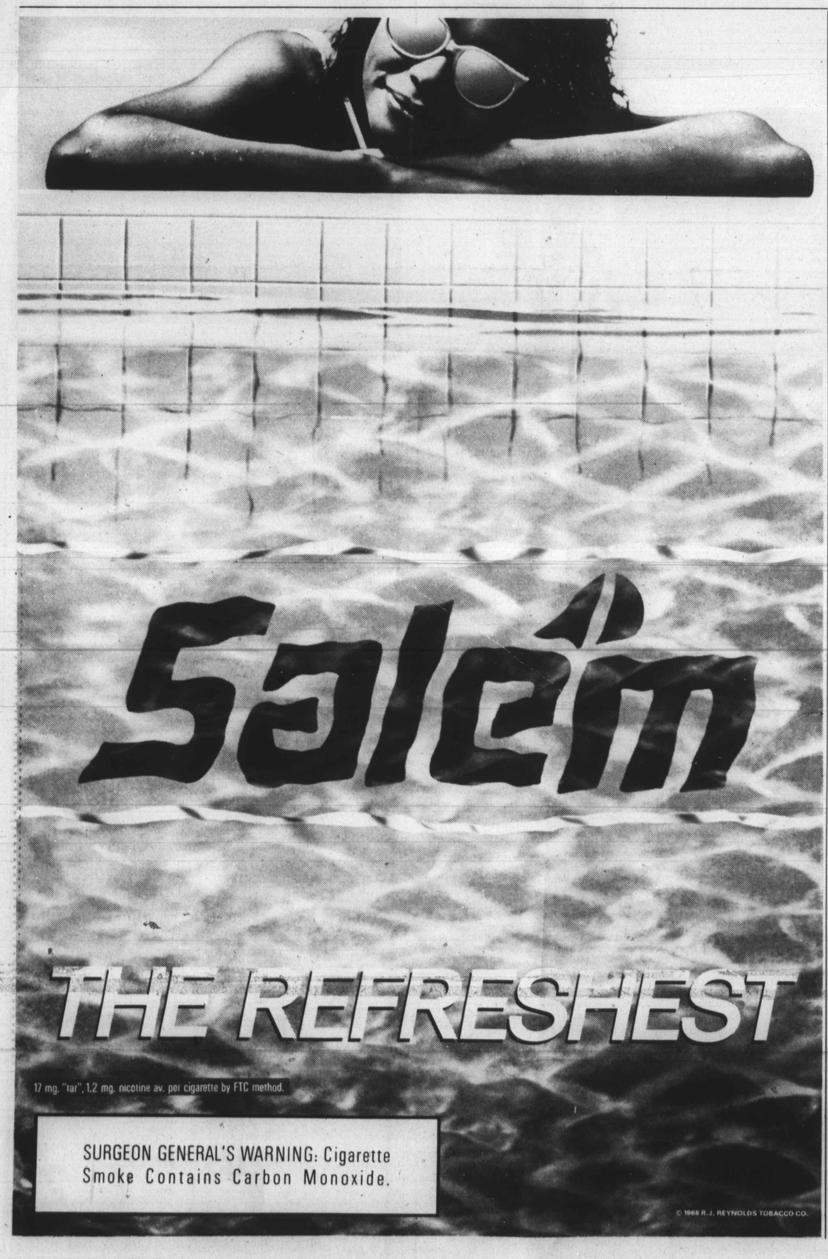
Addressing the morning session, President Mengistu Haile Mariam told the delegates the war in Ethiopia's northernmost province "has not only constrained the rate of our social development ... but has led to the loss of thousands of lives."

Frustration among military commanders at their inability to push back the rebel Eritrean People's Liberation Front was a major factor in an attempted coup d'etat May 18 by a faction of the armed forces high command.

The attempt was foiled only after heavy fighting between pro- and anti-Mengistu forces in Asmara, headquarters of the 150,000-strong Second Army, which is fighting the Eritrean rebels.

The war has also taken a heavy toll on the country's social and economic life, draining resources and manpower as tens of thousands of teenage conscripts have been sent north to join the faltering war effort.

Mengistu is also believed to be coming under pressure from his Soviet sponsors to acknowledge the war cannot be won on the battlefield and to seek a negotiated settlement.

Mengistu's government opened talks with the rebels soon after coming to power in the 1982 revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, but the talks were inconclusive and broke off in 1985.

"This major problem has bled our country for so long," Mengistu said. "It is thus a major task expected of us, the people's deputies, to take practical steps that would lead to the creation of peace through peaceful means." — (UPI)