

Half million Malawians on free AIDS drugs: president

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Malawi is distributing free AIDS drugs to half a million people after years of nationwide HIV tests by the poor southern African nation, President Joyce Banda said Friday.

"Half of the population has so far been tested for HIV and half a million people are now on free drugs," Banda was quoted by state television as telling the first meeting of the UNAIDS and Lancet Commission in the administrative capital Lilongwe.

Malawi has an estimated 15 million citizens, of which only 5,000 people were on free drugs in 2004.

Banda said her country, which depends heavily on foreign aid, has in recent years spent \$722 million—bankrolled by donors and the Global Fund for HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria—to fight the "scourge of HIV and AIDS".

Urging Malawians "to open up" on the topics of sex and AIDS, still considered taboo subjects in the conservative country, Banda said she had ordered that from next month, the country should switch to new AIDS drugs "with less side effects and to promote sustainable health".

"Let's openly discuss HIV and AIDS issues to end stigma and discrimination," she said.

Malawi, where one in 10 people is HIV positive, registers 1,000 new

cases weekly, a top government official said in February, warning most people were not changing their behaviour.

In May the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and medical journal The Lancet convened a new commission of political and health leaders "to explore the post-2015 agenda of AIDS and global health".

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