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 EDITORIAL *On Meeting the Challenge in Africa*

An AIDS-free generation

In recent years, one of the few growth industries in Africa has been the funeral business. It's a grim one-liner cited by health workers trying to stem the spread of the AIDS-causing virus that has devastated dozens of sub-Saharan countries and killed 30 million worldwide.

This past week, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cited the funeral business aphorism but then went in more optimistic direction. A string of proven treatments and tactics offer the hope of an "AIDS-free generation" in the near future, she said. New infections now running at 2.6 million per year will be largely halted.

Millions of infected people will continue to live with their condition, but a wider use of cheaper drugs and other practices may seal off transmission of the virus that

leads to pneumonia, tuberculosis and other diseases when the immune system fails. Cut off the ways humans contract the condition, Clinton argued, and it will fade over time.

Her belief may sound too rosy after 30 years of study, error and debates between treatment advocates, educators and policy wonks. As yet there's no vaccine nor a surefire virus killer. Worldwide, the AIDS bill has hit \$16 billion per year while patient numbers stay even.

Clinton doesn't accept this stalemate. Her answer lies in three relatively modest success stories that she wants to ramp up. First, drugs given to pregnant women can block the transfer of the AIDS virus to infants. Mother-to-child transmission is blamed for 1 in 7 new cases.

Second, voluntary circumcision of men can cut the infection rate as well. Studies in African countries bear this out, and the procedure should be expanded, she said.

Finally, wider use of antiretroviral drugs — which tamp down symptoms and prolong life for an AIDS patient — have the potential to reduce transmission also. Drug costs that once hit over \$1,000 per person in 2004 now run \$335, thanks to generics and wider production, she said.

Clinton's speech contained an extra message. The United States largely carries the burden in the global fight as both the biggest funder and best researcher. She saluted her speech audience at the National Institutes of Health, the top federal scientific think tank, whose leaders have done much to target a tricky, fast-changing virus. But her thoughts were aimed at both Capitol Hill and the wider audience of a deficit-minded electorate at a time when the AIDS pandemic is forgotten and extra foreign aid is a tough sell.

The biggest challenge, she suggested, is finding the will to continue a worthwhile and winnable fight. Victory over an evasive killer is within reach, Clinton said, and it's no time to stop.