



# SIERRA LEONE

# DHAPP

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE HIV/AIDS  
PREVENTION PROGRAM

REDUCING THE INCIDENCE OF HIV/AIDS  
AMONG UNIFORMED PERSONNEL IN  
SELECTED AFRICAN NATIONS AND  
BEYOND

## WINNING BATTLES IN THE WAR AGAINST HIV/AIDS

### BACKGROUND

#### **Country Statistics**

The estimated population of Sierra Leone is 6 million people, with an average life expectancy of 41 years. English is the official language of Sierra Leone, which has an estimated literacy rate of 35%, unevenly distributed between men and women. The government is slowly reestablishing its authority after the 1991 to 2002 civil war. Sierra Leone is an extremely poor nation with tremendous inequality in income distribution. While it possesses substantial mineral, agricultural, and fishery resources, its physical and social infrastructure is not well developed, and serious social disorders continue to hamper economic development. Nearly half of the working-age population engages in subsistence agriculture. The gross domestic product (GDP) per capita is \$800, with 70% of Sierra Leonean people living below the poverty level.

#### **HIV/AIDS Statistics**

The HIV prevalence rate in Sierra Leone's general population is estimated at 1.6%, with approximately 48,000 individuals living with HIV/AIDS. Prevalence rates are thought to be higher in urban than in rural areas. Identified significant risk factors include high-risk heterosexual contact and contact with commercial sex workers. Vulnerable populations include commercial sex workers and their clients, military personnel, ex-combatants, and transportation workers.

#### **Military Statistics**

The Republic of Sierra Leone Armed Forces (RSLAF) consists of approximately 10,500 active-duty members. Sierra Leone expends 2.3% of the GDP on military purposes. The RSLAF undertook a seroprevalence and behavioral study of their troops in 2007. The findings from their study revealed a prevalence rate of 3.29%,

twice that of the general population. Beginning this year, RSLAF has made the decision to enact force wide annual preventive health assessments, which would include HIV testing.

### PROGRAM RESPONSE

#### **In-Country Ongoing Assistance**

The RSLAF HIV/AIDS program began in spring 2002. It is a collaborative effort between the RSLAF, Defense Attaché Office of the US Embassy, and DHAPP. The relationship has fostered many advances in this program. With support from DHAPP, the RSLAF has developed a workplace policy on HIV/AIDS for its personnel. This policy is geared toward creating a working environment free of discrimination and ensuring that all service personnel are aware of the policy. In 2007, the RSLAF began reviewing its current HIV policy with the intention of revising it.

#### **Foreign Military Financing Assistance**

Sierra Leone was awarded Foreign Military Financing (FMF) funding for the acquisition of laboratory equipment, and supporting reagents and supplies related to the diagnosis and treatment of HIV/AIDS. This award was appropriated for fiscal years 2003, 2005, and 2006. Funding for 2003 and 2005 was released for expenditure during FY05 and FY07, respectively. To date, 2003 funding has been used to procure HIV test kits, hepatitis B rapid test kits, generators, and a dry hematology analyzer. Fiscal year 2005 funds have been used to procure HIV test kits and a microplate reader and washer.

### OUTCOMES & IMPACTS

#### **Prevention**

In FY07, 19,265 troops and family members were reached with comprehensive prevention messages, and another 290 were trained in the provision of those messages. There has been a call for the military to teach prevention education in schools, which demonstrates the high regard that the military is held in by their community. Another prevention achievement has been having peer educators bring



their spouses to their trainings, which emphasizes the importance of partner HIV knowledge. The number of peer educators available to the RSALF has also increased. The RSLAF supported 28 condom service outlets which is less than last year. The reduced number of service outlets, stems from the lack of condom availability in the country as well as transportation issues.



Four (4) service outlets provided prevention of mother-to-child (PMTCT) services for military pregnant women. During the year, 232 pregnant women were provided services at these outlets, 28 of whom were provided with a complete course of antiretroviral therapy (ART) prophylaxis. Twelve (12) medical providers were trained in the provision of PMTCT services. One hundred thirty two (132) medical personnel were trained in blood-safety and 156 members were trained in injection safety.

### Care

One service outlet provides HIV-related palliative care for RSLAF members and their families. During the year, 199 troops and dependents were provided with HIV-related palliative care services (152 men, 47 women). Two (2) outlets provided counseling and testing (CT) for military members, and 1,370 troops were tested for HIV and received their results. Another 40 were trained in the provision of CT. With the assistance of the US DoD International Military Advisory and Training Team, the RSLAF will be instituting annual preventive health assessments for all its personnel where 100% of the military will be HIV tested annually. With increased testing needed, the RSALF would like to incorporate mobile HIV CT Centers as well as increasing the number of lay counselors.

### Treatment

One (1) service outlet provides ART for RSLAF members, family, and civilians in the area. During the year, 90 RSLAF troops or family members were established on ART (78 men, 12 women). Twelve (12) providers were trained in the provision of ART. Twelve (12) laboratory technicians were trained in ART services. An HIV/AIDS laboratory was constructed and opened at 5th Brigade Headquarters in Bo, in August 2007. The opening was well attended by the Deputy Defense Minister, Chief of Defense staff, and senior military officers. After the opening ceremony, senior military personnel, including the Deputy Defense Minister, the Chief of Defense staff, 3rd, 4th, and 5th Brigade Commanders, and all Battalion Commanders voluntarily got tested, thus promoting HIV counseling and testing to their troops. Currently, laboratory equipment is being procured for this new lab using FMF funding.

### Other

RSALF hosted 2 policy officers from the Gambian Armed Forces (GAF) to discuss their current military HIV policy since the GAF will be drafting its own. The GAF looked to the RSALF for guidance and idea-sharing as it drafts its policy. Also, the RSLAF will be revising its current HIV policy because it feels it needs to provide more protection for the troops. Thirty-two (32) senior-level officers were trained in reducing stigma and discrimination.

### Proposed Future Activities

DHAPP received a proposal for FY08 activities from the Defense Attaché Office at the US Embassy on behalf of the RSLAF. Specific objectives of the proposal included (1) increasing prevention efforts for troops, family members, and civilians in the surrounding areas; (2) introducing the *Prevention with Positives* program; (3) increasing testing abilities for the RSLAF; and (4) training additional health care providers in PMTCT services, laboratory diagnostics, and ART services.

