

## Eyes and ears

# Cape Town march calls for more effective responses to TB and HIV

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An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

"Amandla! Amandla!" people shouted as if they were taking part in a political rally. But the messages on the placards they carried were far from politically motivated:

"We demand community-based treatment for tuberculosis"

"We demand new simple diagnostic tools and new effective treatment for TB"

"We demand community based treatment for MDR-TB and XDR-TB] [multi-drug resistant and extensively drug resistant TB]"

were just some of the messages written on banners at the protest.

Thousands of people from South Africa, led by the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), turned out for the Cape Town protest on the evening this week's World Conference on Lung Health of the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease was launched. This was the kind of protest that AIDS conferences have seen for years, but is a new thing for the TB community to take part in and witness.

The protest was " a call to action march to make governments in Africa take HIV, AIDS and TB seriously," said Greg Gonsalves of AIDS and Rights Alliance for Southern Africa (ARASA).

Leading South African activist and head of TAC, Zackie Achmat, asked that the event be a peaceful one and called on protestors to avoid any police confrontation. TAC marshalls, clad in yellow "HIV-Positive" reflector jackets, did an excellent job of keeping the crowd in check to avoid what could have turned out to be a huge confrontation with the police who had several times denied TAC police permits to stage the event. The march was marked by a lot of singing and dancing.

The crowds at the event were made up of young and old TAC members, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) representatives, the clergy, healthcare workers from the local Khayelitsha township, as well as international TB and HIV activists.

"Say no to stigma and yes to TB and HIV treatment. Universal access to TB and HIV is needed today and not tomorrow," asserted Lucy Chesire, an HIV-positive TB activist from Kenya who has lived with HIV for 16 years said during the rally. "When a woman has TB in the home, the whole family is vulnerable to infection and it is good that we can see women's faces present at this march today," she told thousands of protesters just before the march.

“We are dying throughout the world from a curable disease, and in South Africa alone almost 70,000 people are infected with TB every year,” added Ezio Santos-Filho, TB-HIV activist and researcher from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, who has lived with HIV since 1985. “We have to demand for new medication, prevention therapy and effective treatment for all.”

These demands are not only aimed at the South African government but at all the governments around the world. South Africa has seen a significant number of XDR-TB cases among people also living with HIV, and with its porous borders and airport transit routes to other parts of the region and the world, it is possible that this strain of TB has already spread to other countries.

South Africa is way ahead of most poor countries in terms of diagnosing TB cases, with many states still relying only smear microscopy or chest x-rays to diagnose active disease. As TB and HIV co-infection cases continue to surge, more reliable and efficient tests for TB are urgently needed as TB bacteria in the sputum of HIV-positive people is frequently undetectable.

The technology used to detect and fight TB is lagging behind those used to combat many other diseases and new systems are required that can be used in even the most basic clinical settings. In the view of many delegates at this week’s conference, the current system of relying on city hospitals for tests following referrals from district-level clinics should be done away with.

In contrast to TB treatments, there have been significant recent advances in HIV drug development, and as we learn more about TB-HIV co-infection it is becoming increasingly urgent for governments to partner with funding agencies – such as the US President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria – and with scientists and research centres, so that these urgent research needs can be addressed rapidly.

Community voices also need to be heard in decision-making, so that there is genuine and real-time feedback from the ground on how best the fight against TB and HIV can be driven. This will also help to ensure that government policy-makers and others in positions of power are kept accountable to their commitments on TB and HIV, and to the demands of those affected by their actions and inaction. The march today placed an important stick in the ground to mark that accountability.

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