

Mbeki silent on Aids

Cosatu calls for leadership

PRESIDENT Thabo Mbeki was silent on HIV/Aids as a call was made in his presence yesterday for "presidential leadership" on the topic.

Representatives of the SA Communist Party (SACP) and the Congress of SA Trade Unions (Cosatu) highlighted HIV/Aids as a key challenge when they addressed a May Day rally in Swellendam in the Western Cape.

"Aids is undermining millions of people's hopes and livelihoods and robbing people of the means to lift themselves out of poverty," Cosatu Western Cape representative Andre Kriel told hundreds gathered at a local primary school.

Describing HIV/Aids as a "national disaster", he expressed concern about a lack of proper government programmes and focus, and called for "presidential leadership".

A national Aids summit should be held, Kriel added, as he accused the Health Department of contributing to confusion around the treatment of the disease.

SACP provincial chairman Gwebbs Qonde said there should be a greater focus on Aids education.

"We must ensure that prevention is highlighted so we reduce the rate of infection," Qonde told the gathering.

HIV/Aids, he added, was causing "social strife" in South African communities.

Mbeki told the gathering that freedoms achieved through the anti-apartheid struggle should be used to change the lives of all South Africans for the better.

This included farm workers, many of whom worked under unacceptable conditions and faced the

constant threat of unlawful evictions.

The only way to reduce unemployment, poverty and homelessness was to build new factories, mines and infrastructure, boost skills development and grow the economy, said Mbeki.

He gave an undertaking that the government was doing all in its power to achieve these objectives.

Kriel said the benefits of an apparently booming economy were not filtering down to poor South Africans.

Job creation was not fast enough, he said, to achieve the target of halving unemployment by 2014.

Those jobs that did exist were often underpaid and insecure.

"The current growth spurt seems to be unsustainable," said Kriel.

It was based on current high prices for mined export products that fuelled the overvaluation of the rand. "This type of growth means jobs are under threat," said Kriel.

Cosatu is embarking on rolling mass action this month in support of its "Jobs and Poverty" campaign.

Qonde expressed concern about government corruption, lamenting what he described as "a growing attitude of entitlement and greediness among the rich".

"Resources intended to improve the lives of poor people find their way into the pockets of government officials." He called for a renewed debate on whether government representatives and public servants should be allowed to be in business and expressed concern about existing relationships between government officials and the private sector.

Qonde expressed the SACP's support for striking security guards.

— Sapa.