

The global fight against HIV faces a significant setback following the U.S. government's recent decision to freeze foreign aid for 90 days. Winnie Byanyima, Executive Director of UNAIDS, has sounded an urgent warning, projecting a surge in new infections and preventable deaths if this decision is not reversed.

In an interview with the Associated Press, Byanyima highlighted the achievements made over the years, noting that global HIV cases have dropped by 60% since their peak in 1995.

In 2023 alone, 1.3 million new infections were recorded, demonstrating steady progress in combating the disease. However, she warned that this momentum could be lost without sustained international support.

According to UNAIDS estimates, discontinuing American aid could have devastating consequences by 2029, including: An increase of up to 8.7 million new HIV cases.

A tenfold rise in AIDS-related deaths, reaching 6.3 million fatalities, and an additional 3.4 million children orphaned due to the disease.

"The situation could spiral out of control," Byanyima said, urging the U.S. to reconsider its role as a global leader in health initiatives.

The effects of the funding freeze are already being felt in some of the hardest-hit African countries.

For instance, in Kenya, 550 health workers specializing in HIV care were abruptly laid off. In Ethiopia, thousands of healthcare positions were eliminated, leaving health officials unable to track the spread of the disease.

"Nearly 90% of HIV programs in countries like Uganda, Mozambique, and Tanzania depend on external funding, much of which comes from the U.S.," Byanyima emphasized.

The funding freeze comes at a critical juncture for HIV prevention. Lenacapavir, a twice-yearly injection developed by the U.S.-based company Gilead, has emerged as a breakthrough prevention tool. It offers comprehensive protection against HIV for women and is highly effective for men.

"This innovation has the potential to eliminate HIV as a public health threat within the next five years," Byanyima said, stressing the irony of U.S. withdrawal amid its

own groundbreaking contributions to global health.

Byanyima urged the U.S. government to review its decision, highlighting that foreign aid constitutes less than 1% of the country's budget.

"Cutting such a small portion of the budget makes no economic sense and disrupts life-saving programs," she said.

She also called on other nations to step up and fill the financial gap, though no country has yet made concrete commitments.

"This is about human lives," Byanyima said. "Without swift action, the world will face dire consequences."

The future of global HIV prevention efforts now hinges on the international community's ability to come together and sustain the progress achieved over the past decades.