

African priest's "miracle cure" stirs debate about HIV/AIDS treatment

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Nairobi, Kenya, December 7 (ENInews)--In villages to towns across Africa, messages of HIV prevention are resonating through churches in the wake of global events marking World AIDS Day.

But the border between faith and science is being tested in Samunge, a sleepy village in Loliondo district near the Kenya-Tanzanian border, where thousands of people are heading for a "miracle cure" being offered by Rev. Ambilikile Mwasapile.

Mwasapile, a 76-year-old retired Lutheran priest, says he received instructions from God to make the medicine. Bishop Thomas Laizer of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Tanzania referred to it as a "God given gift." In March, the bishop said church workers, pastors and bishops had taken the cure and were getting healed.

"The medicine is a savior," he said, and thousands of medical pilgrims and tourists have lined up for a cup of the herbal mixture made from the roots of a tree known as "mugariga." A single cup allegedly treats all sicknesses, including HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, cancer, and asthma.

Nearly a year after taking the "miracle cure," some infected people in East and central Africa have abandoned their daily HIV/AIDS drugs. Many have seen their condition worsen, complicating the fight against the epidemic, according to AIDS experts.

Though many people in Africa rely on traditional herbalists for treatment, authorities have taken note of the "miracle cure." But despite mounting pressure from some politicians and faith leaders, the government says it cannot stop the priest because his actions were inspired by his faith and the mixture is not harmful.

On 25 November, Dr. Haji Mponda, Health and Social Services minister, reported that at least 116 people had died while going or returning from Samunge--including

17 known to be suffering from HIV/AIDS--due to difficulties such as bad roads and weather, as well as waits of up to several weeks.

In Kenya, Christian and Muslim leaders analyzing Mwasapile's "healings" said it indicated a misconception about the link between faith and science, and that some people may feel divine intervention is adequate to cure HIV infection.

"The God of prayer is the same God of Science," said Rev. Wellington Mutiso, general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (EAK), who called for a combination of faith-based and evidence-based public health prevention and treatment. The EAK advised those who drink the "wonder drug" to continue taking medicines because stopping would weaken their body's immune systems and expose them several ailments.

Similar cases have been seen elsewhere in Africa. Last February, the South African government ordered Christ Embassy, a charismatic church from Nigeria, to stop making claims that it could treat HIV/AIDS. According to news reports, The Treatment Action Campaign, the country's main anti-AIDS lobby, had complained after a woman who had progressed well with drugs abandoned them, believing the church had cured her.