# A World Drenched in Blood

January 1, 1997 By Victoria A. Brownworth

In 1982, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) established that AIDS is a blood-borne disease. Sterilization processes and testing to prevent contamination of the blood supply were available by 1983, and the CDC recommended that those measures be applied. Yet well into the 1980s, many countries continued to ignore the warnings, allowing a $2 billion industry lethal leeway concerning processing and distribution of blood and blood products. The result, according to WHO, was the needless infections of an estimated one million people with hemophilia (PWHs) and blood-transfusion recipients worldwide -- many of whom have died.

AIDS activism by PWHs has forced governments and corporations to acknowledge their complicity in this bloodletting and, in 22 countries, to pay compensation. Scandals continue to be uncovered. In most developing countries, blood products are still not adequately tested -- so HIV infection through blood products will likely continue into the next century.

**1. U.S.:** Blood-product companies refuse to test or heat-treat for two years after CDC warning. FDA fails to require testing until 1985, and companies distribute tainted products until 1986. Hundreds of PWHs sue companies. In 1995, Supreme Court rejects class-action suit. In 1996, companies reach collective settlement with PWHs, which many reject.

**2. Canada:** Improperly treated products distributed until 1987. Government compensates PWHs, and inquiry warns numerous officials of possible misconduct charges.

**3. Haiti:** Government corruption allows distribution of contaminated products as late as 1989, despite a high HIV-infection rate.

**4. Mexico:** Lax governmental controls and corruption allows distribution of tainted blood collected here to companies worldwide. Paid plasma collection banned in 1987 after hundreds of donors contract HIV from reused needles.

**5. Costa Rica:** Bayer sends remaining inventory of contaminated blood products here after FDA bans further distribution in U.S. More than 1,500 Costa Rican PWHs infected.

**6. Brazil:** Goverment allows tainted blood products long after testing is available. In 1991, first PWH sues for compensation and wins, though government denies complicity. Class action suit filed by PWHs in 1993.

**7. U.K.:** For many years, British companies import HIV-tainted blood products from several U.S. companies. In 1988, infected patients begin receiving compensation from government fund.

**8. France:** Four blood-system administrators convicted of “poisoning” and sentenced to up to four years in jail in 1993-94 for allowing HIV contamination; many physicians and scientists unsuccessfully seek pardons for the four. Media exposés and grassroots efforts to indict former prime minister (unsuccessful thus far) contribute to defeat of Mitterand government in 1995.

**9. Germany:** In 1995, four officials of Haemoplas Corp. and UB Plasma are convicted for distributing HIV tainted blood products. Government admits cover-up and creates fund for infected PWHs.

**10. Switzerland:** Contaminated blood products are delivered to hospitals through 1986, more than a year after discovery of infected blood. Red Cross uses HIV-tainted blood supplies until discovered in 1993. Former Red Cross official indicted in 1994, and government sets up Emergency Fund for infected PWHs.

**11. Romania:** Unsterilized blood products and needles produce thousands of HIV infections. After fall of Ceausescu dictatorship, more than 2,300 orphans found to have HIV or AIDS due to blood transfusions.

**12. Zaire:** Blood products are still not routinely screened for HIV antibodies, despite an extremely high rate of HIV infection.

**13. Rwanda:** Blood products not heat treated until 1987. Deferral of blood donors with risk factors for HIV “under review” since 1994.

**14. Burundi:** Screening of blood for HIV not established outside of International Red Cross/WHO centers until late 1980s.

**15. India:** Contaminated-blood scandal uncovered in 1995. Paid donation clinics still open throughout major cities. Screening and processing of blood products remains suspect.

**16. Japan:** Government doesn’t approve blood-product sterilization until 1985; never pulls contaminated products. In 1996, prosecutors raid Green Cross Pharmaceutical Corp. for selling tainted products. Government adviser facing criminal charges.

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