Withdrawal Symptoms

January 1, 2001 By Doug Allen

After spending the better part of 2000 questioning the causal link between HIV and AIDS and sparking a firestorm of bad press -- all the while putting the country's policy on anti-HIV meds on hold -- South African President Thabo Mbeki announced in October that he would pull out of the debate. He didn't apologize for his incendiary inquiries and told reporters, "If you are looking for pop answers, you are not going to get them from me, because science is not reducible to campaign slogans." As part of his backpedal, Mbeki appointed three Cabinet ministers to replace him on an advisory panel charged with evaluating the HIV/AIDS link. Many fear that Mbeki's Doubting Thomas act undermined South Africa's safer-sex initiatives, and even the embattled president has admitted that his actions "might have resulted in this confusion." South African citizens appear to agree -- Mbeki's approval rating dropped from 70 percent last May to about 50 percent in the fall, with 62 percent saying they do not have confidence in the government's ability to stop the spread of the virus. Nathan Geffen, spokesperson for the local Treatment Action Campaign, has a "too little, too late" take on Mbeki's damage control. "Public pressure has come down overwhelmingly on the side of the view that HIV does cause AIDS," Geffen said. "But I don't think it's clear yet that the government is making a firm commitment in that regard. We hope so, but the verdict is still out."

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