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Desk

Clinton Urges Global Planning to Halt H.I.V.

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Bill Clinton said at an international AIDS conference here tonight that he regretted not having done more about AIDS while he was president and that he had erred in not supporting needle exchange programs to prevent spread of the virus among drug users.

In an interview with reporters after a session of the 14th International AIDS Conference, Mr. Clinton also urged leaders in Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, regions hit hard by AIDS, to speak out forcefully and develop plans to stop the spread of H.I.V., the virus that causes the syndrome. Mr. Clinton was attending the conference as part of a panel of current and former heads of state, the first such event at an AIDS conference. He said that although many political leaders had been afraid to take a strong stand on AIDS, "not a single one of them will be defeated for doing the right thing in this area."

In the interview, he said that after keeping a low profile, for personal and policy reasons, in the 18 months since he had left office, he had decided the time was right to speak out on AIDS. "I had young friends who died in their 20's," Mr. Clinton said; "I don't want kids to die."

Also, he said, AIDS "is an issue that was not getting the requisite amount of effort, I thought the potential for destruction was breathtaking, America was a little slow on the uptake, and there it was exploding."

He called the epidemic an economic, security and humanitarian issue for which the United States should pay its fair share, adding, "That requires us to go from \$800 million a year now to \$2.5 billion, which is a couple of months of the Afghan war."

"If we don't do it," he said, "we will be spending

far, far more than that to clean up the mess of this humanitarian tragedy."

He applauded Jesse Helms, the longtime North Carolina senator who is on the verge of retirement, for ending his opposition to AIDS expenditures and urging the United States to invest \$500 million a year to fight the disease. "This is a much more fluid political situation than people assumed," Mr. Clinton said, "and if people are given the facts, they will do the right thing because they do not want to see their children die."

He stressed the need for each country to develop "a plan that says, 'Here is what we are doing and here is what we need from the rest of the world.'" "Further spread of the disease, he added, could lead to more ethnic wars and destabilize democracies in Africa.

He foresaw a similar possibility in parts of the former Soviet Union, where a spreading epidemic could lead countries to "become even more dominated by narco-traffickers and organized criminals."

Asked about what he had done to fight AIDS as president, Mr. Clinton said: "Do I wish I could have done more? Yes, but I do not know that I could have done it."

In particular, he cited his stance on needle-exchange programs, saying, "I think I was wrong about that; I should have tried harder to do that." He was referring to his administration's refusal in 1988, after a bitter internal debate, to lift a longstanding ban on federal financing for programs to distribute clean needles to drug addicts, even as top government scientists said such programs did not encourage drug abuse and could save lives.

At the time, Mr. Clinton's advisers said they feared a political disaster for him if he lifted the ban. They also feared that Republicans might push through legislation stripping federal money from groups that provided free needles even if the groups could show that the money was being used for other purposes.

Mr. Clinton also took the occasion to applaud the 12 Caribbean countries for signing a program to buy AIDS drugs at a lower price than they could have individually.

If the Caribbean plan succeeds, he said, it should be tried in the former Soviet Union, where health systems are collapsing.

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CORRECTION-DATE: July 18, 2002, Thursday

CORRECTION:

Because of an editing error, an article on July 12 about Bill Clinton's efforts to fight AIDS while president misstated the year he refused to lift a ban on federal financing for clean needles to drug addicts. It was 1998, not 1988.