

Lesotho's 'long walk' to HIV/AIDS freedom

IT is February 27, 1988 Leronti, who is in his early thirties, has just stepped out of a taxi.

Employed in the mines of South Africa, he is excited by the thought of reuniting with his family.

He eagerly anticipates sharing a bed with his wife of seven years.

However, his mind keeps drifting back to his younger girlfriend at the mine camp, a strikingly voluptuous woman who does things to him that his wife would only deem immoral.

Suddenly, Leronti pauses mid-stride. Ahead, at one of the village homesteads, a crowd is gathering.

Men lounge by the kraal while women sat in front of the hut.

A sense of unease washes over him as he approaches cautiously, like a lion on the prowl.

A man at the kraal notices him and calls out, "Leronti!"

It was Thapelo, usually full of energy, but today he lacks his usual cheer. The other men turn to acknowledge him with smiles and nods, and quickly avert their gazes.

Normally, they would be showering him with jokes and asking for beer. Not today.

Clearing his throat, Leronti asked, "What's going on, banna?"

The young man looked up and shrugged, "It's Ramatlali. He's gone."

He hesitated before adding, "The new strange disease."

The new strange disease. In the late '80s, it swept through villages like wildfire.

Now, in 2025, almost 40 years later, HIV/AIDS is no longer a death sentence. Yet, we must admit that the journey to freedom has been long. Shall we recap?

The first reported case of HIV/AIDS in Lesotho was in 1986.

This "new disease" wreaked havoc across villages quickly establishing itself as the top health threat in the country.

Globally, the earliest confirmed HIV case was in the DRC back in 1959.

When HIV first hit Lesotho the reaction was one of shock.

There were unsuccessful attempts to set up prevention organisations with help from

the UN.

Those early efforts lacked solid data and reporting was inconsistent.

By 1992, about 100 cases had been confirmed. But the reality was that most cases were never reported.

Fast forward to today, despite ranking among the top three countries with the highest HIV prevalence, in 2020, Lesotho hit the 90/90/90 UN target — 90 percent of all people living with HIV are tested and diagnosed, treated and virally suppressed.

National Agenda



Mokone Rantsoeleba

And Lesotho is on track to reach 95 percent of these targets this year.

This progress is largely thanks to the financial backing from the United States' PEPFAR support and the Global Fund, both of which underpin UNAIDS' goal of ending HIV by 2030.

However, with the new US Presidential



administration and its call for pausing foreign assistance, Lesotho now faces the risk of losing or cutting back on that support. What will happen to the 240 000 people currently receiving HIV treatment and those

benefiting from HIV prevention programmes and health systems strengthening?

This breaks my heart.

Let's talk more about this funding crisis next week.

QOQA HA LELELE U SA TŠOHE HO FELLOA!

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