

# Spectre of AIDS haunts Carnival

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**R**IO DE JANEIRO — As Brazil gets ready to revel in the fleshy pleasures of Carnival, a new and fearsome visitor has arrived that is casting a pall of fear over the nation's lenten saturnalia — that modern-day version of the black death — AIDS.

AIDS is no stranger to Brazil. This nation already has the second-highest number of victims after the United States. What makes the situation particularly frightening here is that so many pleasure-prone Brazilians remain blissfully unaware of the terrible scourge that may be sweeping down on them.

Today there are more than 1,200 confirmed AIDS cases in Brazil. How many people here have been infected by the virus remains unknown. Both the numbers of confirmed cases and infected people are believed to greatly understate the actual extent of the disease's advance. Health care in Brazil is rudimentary in wide areas or even non-existent. Many, perhaps even most, of the cases go unrecognized and unreported.

Brazil's president has just launched a nation-wide appeal aimed at alerting people to the dangers of AIDS and its modes of transmission. Intensive advertising is already under way urging people to use condoms. One TV commercial features an American woman who tells viewers that there is an inoculation against AIDS — "It's called condoms."

That an American woman was used is no coincidence. Brazilians believe that AIDS has been imported from the U.S. and regard it as a North American phenomenon. There is good reason for such a view. Rio, in particular, has long been a favored vacation spot for homosexuals. Here, comely young boys and men of every color and shade are readily available for hire at the cost of one drink in New York or Paris. Rio has an active and

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boisterous gay nightlife and even sports the very type of men's baths that have been banned in North America.

North America may not, I suspect, be the only AIDS vector. Gay men from Europe arrive here in great numbers. Many of them have taken past vacations in East or West Africa. Favored European tourist destinations like the Kenyan coast or Gambia are rife with the AIDS virus. Worse, with the more virulent form of the virus that may also be more readily transmitted between men and women.

Adding to these concerns, Brazil's racially varied population is at least 60% black or mulatto. Recent studies in the U.S. have suggested that blacks may have an inherent susceptibility to the AIDS virus, just as they have to sickle cell anemia and certain types of cancers. If so, Brazil could be in for the same type of situation now facing Central Africa, where the disease is beginning to approach epidemic levels. Nor can we totally discount the link between Africa's black population, in which AIDS originated, and the genetically similar black peoples of Brazil. AIDS may just have developed here independent of North America.

Whatever the source, AIDS is expected to spread rapidly. Anal sex, a prime transmitter of the disease, is

particularly common here. The female derrieres that are a source of intense national pride are sex objects and a form of local birth control.

Any form of sex education here will be a painful process. Only 40% of the population is functionally literate and television does not reach many people. In the interior or in the poverty-stricken northeast, ignorance to the dangers of AIDS cannot hope to be eliminated in a short period. To people sorely afflicted by hunger and a variety of other more evident diseases, warnings about a sickness that may develop years later are not taken very seriously.

Educated Brazilians may be starting to reluctantly use condoms. But the masses still remain to be convinced. Such skepticism is not uniquely Brazilian. In the United States, where the airwaves are filled with terrifying reports about AIDS, sales of condoms have not yet risen. Americans, like Brazilians, still think that AIDS is a disaster that happens to someone else.

Stopping the spread of AIDS in a highly developed nation like the U.S. or Canada will be a herculean task. What is to be done in a nation like Brazil — or in the even less developed countries of the Third World — where public understanding is minimal? And what if the truly apocalyptic predictions of the U.S. surgeon general are true? Two weeks ago he said in a speech that AIDS would become, over the next decade, "a second black death." As an educated man he must know that the black death killed one third of the population of Europe. As a high public official he must also have chosen his words with care.

Grim thoughts indeed with which to begin Carnival. This year, all of those favored macabre costumes — skeletons, the grim reaper and the like — will have a new and eerie meaning.