

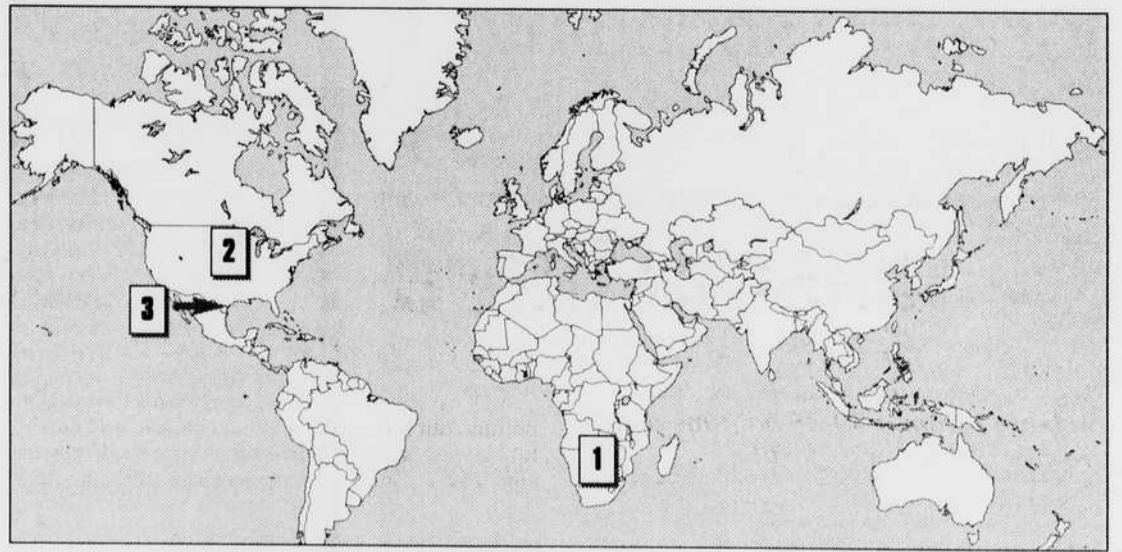
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AIDS crisis hits hard in South Africa

1 JOHANNESBURG, South Africa — AIDS has rapidly crept up on South Africa and poses a tragedy worse than apartheid, the United Nation's top AIDS official said Monday.

"We are faced with an unprecedented crisis," said Dr. Peter Piot, head of the U.N. AIDS program. He said the scourge is worse than South Africa's former system of white minority rule or natural tragedies like drought.

"None of them will claim so many victims," he said.

About two-thirds of the 33 million people worldwide who are infected with the HIV virus that causes AIDS live south of the Sahara. An estimated two million people will die of the disease in sub-Saharan Africa this year, four times the total for the rest of the world.

Apartheid, which ended in 1994, helped isolate South Africa and made it a latecomer to the AIDS epidemic. But it is fast catching up with its neighbors. An estimated 3.2 million South Africans are HIV positive, or about 12 to 14 percent of adults.

More than 1 million South Africans will have died of AIDS by 2001, bringing the life expectancy down from 68 years to 48 within the first decade of the new millennium, the U.N. Development Program said.

Mother pleads guilty to strangling her children

2 ST. PAUL, Minn. — A sobbing mother pleaded guilty Monday to murdering her six children, ages 5 to 11, in what her attorney said was a fit of suicidal distress.

"I strangled their necks," said Khoua Her, a Laotian-born Hmong woman who spoke through an interpreter as Ramsey County prosecutor Chris Wilton asked her to describe the Sept. 3 killings.

The 24-year-old pleaded guilty to second-degree murder, agreeing to a 50-year sentence that would make her eligible for parole in a little more than 33 years.

"This was her only opportunity to cut a deal where she may get out someday," said defense attorney Bruce Wenger. "She's doing way, way, way too much time, but the risks were too great should we go to a jury and lose."

Her stared at the floor and cried through much of the hearing as the prosecutor sought details about the deaths of her three sons and three daughters. Each of the six times she was asked whether she intended to kill her victim, she replied: "Yes."

She said the children were outside playing on the evening of the murders. She called them in one by one and tied a piece of black cloth around their necks.

Under questioning from Wenger, Her said she was suicidal the day of the killings and murdered the children because she

was worried about what would happen to her children after she died.

"If I died, then nobody would love my children," she said.

Death row inmate evades authorities

3 HUNTSVILLE, Texas — Investigators found a hacksaw blade they believe was used by convicted killer Martin Gurule to begin his escape from death row, prison officials said Monday.

Gurule remained free for a fourth day despite the efforts of 500 prison guards and 70 tracking dogs who crisscrossed heavily wooded and swampy areas around the state's death row.

"We're going to go on the assumption he's still here until we find evidence he's not," said Sgt. Tommy Freeman, who manages the dog teams at the prison.

Gurule and six other condemned killers likely used the hacksaw blade to cut through a recreation yard fence at Ellis Unit about 85 miles northeast of Houston. They made it onto the roof, but six of the inmates were caught after guards starting firing.

Gurule, 29, went on to scale two fences topped with razor wire and dashed across a grassy area to disappear into heavy fog. He's the first inmate in 64 years to escape from the state's death row.

—The Associated Press

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