

Zambia introduces free health care after debt relief

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By Shapi Shacinda

KAFUE, Zambia (Reuters) - Peter Chibize wiped the dust off a bench with a handkerchief and waited, agonizing over how he would convince the doctor to give him free treatment for his chest pains, headache and bad cough.

He had delayed his visit to the Nangongwe clinic in southern Zambia because he could not pay medical fees until excruciating pain finally forced him to make the 20 km (12 miles) walk from his Shamatuli village.

"Next," a nurse shouted from the consultation room and the 67-year-old nervously rose. Soon he was beaming when he was told that he did not have to pay for his treatment.

Zambia scrapped health fees on Saturday, one of the first benefits to flow from debt relief granted to African countries last year by the G8 group of wealthy nations.

"It was like a dream to me," Chibize said. "Not to pay anything when you visit a clinic is amazing."

Many poor people across Zambia often die because they cannot afford health care and are forced to resort to ineffectual traditional remedies.

Fees range between \$5 and \$10 but are still too costly for most Zambians -- 65 percent of whom live below the World Bank poverty threshold of \$1 a day.

Barbara Stocking, director of British charity Oxfam, said the abolition of medical fees in Zambia was one of the first examples of how the G8 debt deal had made a difference.

"On the ground it will mean thousands of people get treatment for the first time in their lives," she said.

Finance Minister Ng'andu Magande said in February that Zambia hoped to have its external debt reduced to about \$502 million by July from \$7.1 billion at the end of 2004.

Stocking said the focus should now turn to tackling the desperate shortage of health workers -- a common problem on the continent where locals are lured to the West with better salaries and working conditions.

She said the doctor/patient ratio in Zambia was one per 14,000, compared to one per 600 in Britain.

For now, though, the initial step was enough for Chibize.

"We normally take our children to traditional medicine men who give them herbs, some of which are fatal," he said, shoving a painkiller into the pocket of his creased brown jacket.

"I will announce at the village as soon as I arrive that the fees have now been scrapped."