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Lonely ship-breakers sitting atop ticking AIDS bomb

By Harit Mehta
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Alang (Bhavnagar): Alang, the world's biggest ship-breaking yard, may be a ticking AIDS bomb, waiting to explode.

So far, 75 confirmed HIV cases have been reported in Bhavnagar's Sir T Hospital — the only voluntary counselling and testing centre in the district. While the agencies active in Alang-Sosiya yard have identified 38 HIV cases from Alang alone.

Dr Niloo Vaishnav, chairman of Bhavnagar blood bank, which runs Project Aids Alang (PAA) with the help of Gujarat State Aids Control Society (GSACS) says, "The incidence of HIV cases is very high in Alang. Of the 3,500 people who have come for voluntary blood testing in the last four years, around 38 have tested positive."

According to GSACS officials, the cases recorded with them are only those tested at government hospi-

Disturbing figures

- Around 38 people from Alang have tested positive in the last four years
- Alang has some 40,000 male migrant labourers from different parts of the country
- According to rough estimates, around 7.5 per cent people suffer from sexually-transmitted diseases

tals and the final figure was certainly much higher.

Dr Vaishnav said a projection carried out by an AIDS expert from the New York-based Albert Einstein School of Medicine showed that the prevalence of the infection could be as high as 5 per cent in Alang. This is perhaps the highest prevalence of HIV anywhere in Gujarat.

Alang has a population of around 40,000 male migrant labourers from Orissa, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. Most of them leave their families behind to come here to earn a living. And almost all of them belong to the sexually-active age group of 18-45 —

around 39 per cent are between 18-25 years and 46 per cent belong to the 25-45 age bracket. "The problem is compounded by the fact that there are very few women in the area. This makes the area even more trouble-prone as far as passing the infection is concerned," says Mahesh Jani, project officer of PAA.

He says besides multiple-partner sexual activity, unorganised prostitution and rampant homosexuality are also important factors. "It has been observed that sex workers from surrounding villages come here, many of them under the pretext of selling vegetables, fruits," says Jani.