

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

Office of the Resident Coordinator Of The United Nations System's  
Operational Activities For Development in Malaysia

*Please check against delivery*

**Launch of “*Never Give Up, Never Forget*”**  
**International AIDS Memorial Day 2008**

Welcoming Remarks

by

Richard Leete, PhD

United Nations Resident Coordinator,  
UNDP Resident Representative for Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei  
Darussalam, and  
UNFPA Representative for Malaysia

**19 Mar 2008**  
**Kuala Lumpur**

Ladies and gentlemen, members of the media and friends

A very good morning to you all.

On behalf of the United Nations family, thank you for coming to the launch of our campaign, "Never Give Up, Never Forget," which aims to reduce the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLHIV).

Today, we are extremely honoured to have representatives from the community of PLHIV and the dedicated people who care for them here with us.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Over twenty years have passed since the first HIV cases were detected in Malaysia. Yet we find that there is still much confusion and misunderstanding about the disease, how it's transmitted, and myths on the sorts of people who get infected. Despite various public health campaigns, many people still fear that they may get infected by sharing utensils or by casual contact with someone who is HIV positive.

For those living with HIV, perhaps the most painful symptom is the persistent stigmatization and discrimination they face in their daily lives, borne from ignorance, indifference and prejudice.

People with, or suspected of having, HIV may be turned away from health care services, denied housing and employment, shunned by friends and colleagues, or turned down for insurance coverage. They live in constant fear, which may prevent them from seeking treatment for AIDS or acknowledging their HIV status publicly. In short, they live in isolation from the rest of society.

Numerous studies at the international level have shown that stigma and discrimination are the major obstacles to effective HIV/AIDS prevention and care. "Never Give Up, Never Forget" represents a challenge for us to ensure that all people, with or without HIV, are able to realise their human rights and live with dignity.

We hope that this campaign will help create awareness among Malaysian public on the burden of stigma and discrimination faced by PLHIV and how we each have a role to play in changing this for the better.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As the world nears the fourth decade of AIDS, it is becoming clearer than ever that this is the most devastating disease humanity has ever faced. Driven by stigma and inequality the global epidemic makes ever deeper inroads into human security, threatening to rollback decades of socio-economic development and cutting labour productivity. Faltering basic services such as health, welfare, and judicial systems, are significantly impeding efforts to help developing countries meet the governance challenge posed by the epidemic.

Halting and reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS is one of the eight Millennium Development Goals agreed to by world leaders at the United Nations in 2000. It is no exaggeration to say that unless the world meets this one, it has little prospect of meeting the others, particularly the overarching target of halving extreme poverty by 2015.

As the UN's global development network, UNDP has made HIV/AIDS one of its core priorities, working across the world to help governments respond to the multifaceted challenges it imposes. We are working with sister agencies within the UN system to tackle the problem both at the policy level and on the ground.

Today, we are pleased to witness the launch of the UNCT publication, "Impact of HIV," the country's first comprehensive review of the socioeconomic realities and struggles of PLHIV, their families and the community.

The publication sheds light on how far we still have to go to get a grip on the problem. In Malaysia, there have been over 6,000 new HIV cases annually since 2002. It is clear that without effective treatment and care, they will join the ranks of the more than nine thousand people who have already died of AIDS.

The study also supports the consensus that we need a multi-sectoral and coordinated approach to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS. Because the impact of living with HIV/AIDS transcends the biological to include social, economic, political and psychological consequences, we have to look at systemic protection programs that will allow PLHIV to come forward to get tested early and to seek treatment, while realizing their rights to employment and to live with dignity.

There is a need to scale up resources for community based organizations in order for them to expand their reach to vulnerable groups in society. The success of grassroots initiatives in bringing PLHIV and those who are in high risk situations into the fold of their programmes suggests that a bottom-up strategy can be critical in advocating for behaviour change and preventing primary and secondary infection.

The latest statistics from the Ministry of Health reveal that the face of HIV in this country is increasingly young and female. The rising number of HIV cases by heterosexual transmission signals a shifting profile of the disease in Malaysia. Therefore, efforts to foster an environment that is inclusive and non-discriminatory must be complemented by programs and policies to promote male responsibility when engaging in sexual activity and other continuous HIV/AIDS education initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

This campaign, "Never Give Up, Never Forget," is a call for us to intensify our efforts to address stigma and discrimination, to generate hope and to celebrate a life that is positively lived. It is no longer enough to recognize how stigma affects us, we must be creative and innovative to develop and implement strategies that will help individuals, families, and communities to survive this epidemic.

The good news is that even the most severe HIV epidemic can be turned back, when HIV prevention and care are tackled seriously through community-wide efforts with the full support of governments, NGOs, religious institutions, and business. In every continent across the world, from cities and rural areas, we have examples of safe behaviours resulting in markedly lower HIV rates. The extension of access to care is slowly gaining momentum, and is bringing hope to millions.

The United Nations believes that every effort to fight AIDS at a global level is shaped and strengthened by the experiences of people confronting the disease on the ground and we are pleased to support PT Foundation in this vital role.

In closing, I would like to thank each one of you for your support in this campaign. Let us fight discrimination related to HIV/AIDS wherever we find it – at the workplace, in our cities and kampungs, in schools, at places of worship. Only when we make the virus our common enemy, and not those affected by it, will we succeed in this global fight.

Thank you.