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Launch of World AIDS Day 2008

Speech

by

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Darussalam, and
UNFPA Representative for Malaysia

29 November 2008
Kuala Lumpur

Board of Trustees, PT Foundation,

Mr. Hisham Hussein, Chairman of PT Foundation,

Mr. Baktiar Talhar, Executive Director, Malaysian AIDS Council Malaysia,

My colleague, Mr. Youssouf Oomar, Representative, UNICEF and
Chair of the UN Country Team Theme Group on HIV and AIDS,

Distinguished guests, Colleagues and Members from the media.

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Good morning.

Firstly, allow me to thank the organisers of the Red Carnival 2008 for graciously inviting me to your event today. I have newly arrived in Malaysia and it is a wonderful opportunity for my wife and me to join you all today.

The 1st of December is a day when individuals and organisations from around the world come together to bring attention to the global AIDS epidemic. Your presence here today links you with the millions of people who have joined hands around the world in commemorating World AIDS Day. This is a day when we reflect on the people we have lost, the loved ones we care for, the achievements we have gained, failures we have struggled through, and the continuing work which needs to be done.

World AIDS Day first began in 1988 and we hold them every year so that we can repeatedly call for the compassion and support that is needed to stop this epidemic and to lessen its impact. We observe this day to draw media and public attention to an epidemic which has affected people and communities in every part of the world.

2008 marks the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day. Whilst we have come a long ways since 1988, there is much more to be done.

Globally, the number of people living with HIV continues to grow, as do the number of deaths due to AIDS. Globally, there are now 33 million people living with HIV. A staggering 2.7 million adults and children were infected in 2007 alone.

Here in Malaysia, more than 80 000 people have been reported to have acquired HIV since 1986. Today, though the number of people reported to be newly infected with HIV is less than it was 5 years ago, the four fold increase in newly reported HIV cases amongst women and girls in the last 10 years is cause for enormous concern. There are many challenges ahead and there is a need to strengthen and exhibit leadership at all levels.

My friends, this year's World AIDS Day theme, as in 2007, highlights both the political and civil society leadership and partnership needed to fulfil commitments that have been made in response to HIV and AIDS, particularly the promise of universal access to prevention, treatment, care and support. Good leadership empowers everyone – individuals, organisations, governments – to lead in the response to AIDS. When there is strong and committed political and civil society leadership, the response to the epidemic is more effective.

In this context, PT Foundation's World AIDS Day theme, "I Love Me", is timely and extremely important as it emphasises the need for individuals to step up and take responsibility and assume leadership in responding to HIV and AIDS.

The 6th Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of combating HIV and AIDS is particularly important in Malaysia's context because it currently remains the critical goal that will decide whether Malaysia is on track to achieve all the MDGs at the aggregate level by 2015. To address this, the Government of Malaysia and civil society organisations such as PT Foundation have shown inspiring leadership and great courage in responding to HIV and AIDS in this country. Their remarkable achievements in addressing the epidemic through prevention and treatment programmes have ranged from nationwide policies which affect millions to marginalised communities living in the back alleys of Lorong Haji Taib in Kuala Lumpur.

Friends, the work of community organizations and activists such as those in PT Foundation has been most important. The communities of People Living with HIV, sex workers, men who have sex with men, mak nyahs and drug users have acted as the conscience of the AIDS movement in Malaysia, reminding the politicians, civil society leaders, religious leaders, bureaucrats and doctors of our responsibilities and of the lives that are at stake.

At the same time, communities have played a significant role in supporting and keeping their members alive, usually with too little money or support. Many of those gathered here today are able to do so due to PT Foundation's work on programmes such as Positive Living and the IKHLAS Drop In centre.

We have finally arrived at a point of great hope and great opportunity in efforts against AIDS in Malaysia. Because of better access to HIV treatment, we have all helped to increase the spirit of hope, with thousands and thousands of people returning to normal, productive, fulfilling lives.

Your achievements here in Malaysia, particularly those of PT Foundation, are extraordinary and have inspired my colleagues and me.

My friends, on this World AIDS Day, all of us who are working to end this epidemic must decide to put communities first in our work, to make financial and human support for young people and for women a priority, and, most importantly, to place the highest priority on compassion for each other. We must unite with the goal of saving lives.

I call upon PT Foundation and other community based organisations to encourage leadership by its members, particularly those who are living with HIV and who are vulnerable and marginalised.

Individuals must feel empowered to enable them to access treatment, to know their rights and take action against stigma and discrimination, and to know and use methods of prevention against receiving and transmitting HIV.

I also call on the Government of Malaysia and civil society organisations such as PT Foundation to double their efforts in order to deliver on the promises made under the National Strategic Plan on HIV/AIDS 2006 – 2010.

Now, more than ever is the time to lead, empower and deliver.

I am pleased to now officially launch and open the World AIDS Day RED CARNIVAL.

Thank you.