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Welcome Address

By

Vijay Menon
Welcome Address by Vijay Menon, Secretary-General, Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC)

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this seminar on "Mass Media and AIDS in Southeast Asia".

Ten years ago, AMIC with support from UNESCO and WHO, organized a Roundtable on "Promoting Public Health and Nutrition in ASEAN Countries: The Need to Involve the Mass Media". The Roundtable brought together media and public health decision-makers at the policy level. The two main objectives were to:

* heighten awareness in the mass media of their important responsibility for the health and well-being of their people, and

* to initiate a dialogue aimed at strengthening institutional relationships between decision makers in media and public health.

Today, we meet in Bangkok for a similar purpose. But while the objectives are essentially the same, the participation is broader, the focus is sharper, and the urgency is far, far greater.

The statistics relating to AIDS call for action -- immediate, concerted and sustained action -- if the countries of Asia are to be spared the horrendous impact of the disease which has ripped the economic and social fabric of parts of Africa.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that on July 1, 1994, there were 4 million AIDS cases in the world, up from 2.5 million cases just a year ago. The number of people infected with the AIDS-inducing HIV is up by 3 million to 17 million. The cumulative total of Asian HIV infections, now 2.5 million, is expected to rise four-fold to over 10 million people by the year 2000.

An Asian Development Bank economist has stated that the centre of the AIDS pandemic is steadily moving towards the developing countries of Asia. He has pointed out that investment in preventive measures will be significantly lower than the cost of a widespread AIDS epidemic and urged governments to allocate more resources to the health sector.

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The present budgetary patterns reveal that the priorities are not what they should be. If we look at Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, as against a defence appropriation ranging from 8.3 to 17.8 per cent of the budget, the health allocation is much lower at 1.8 to 6.3%.

But funding alone cannot serve as a magic wand to banish the scourge of AIDS. If the target populations are not informed, educated and mobilized, even the best designed programmes are likely to fail. We must marshal the collective resources of the community against this impending calamity. Those who control or influence the media must be aided, encouraged and challenged by the public health sector to assist in creating, an informed and enlightened population.

It is our hope that this seminar will contribute to this process of interaction and cooperation.

Today’s meeting is one of almost 20 that we will be holding this year. In addition, we have a number of activities relating to Documentation, Publications and Research. We are aided in our efforts by the steadfast support of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung of Germany and the Government of Singapore. We must acknowledge the invaluable support of the Canada-Asean Centre which has made this seminar possible, and the cooperation and help extended by our seminar partner, the Department of Public Health of Mahidol University. We are also most grateful to our many speakers who have agreed to share their insights and experience with us.

We thank you most sincerely, our Chief Guest, Dr. Udomsilp, Vice-Minister of Health, our Keynote Speaker, Mr. Hedayat Ahmed, Director, UNESCO-PROAP, and our many distinguished guests for joining us this morning to formally inaugurate this important seminar. Your presence will be a source of encouragement to all of us.

* * *

1. Conference on Aids to confront Asian plights in Straits Times, Singapore.

2. Asian govts. urged to buy Aids insurance, Straits Times, Singapore.