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Aids-Marina

EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP NEEDED TO FIGHT AIDS, SAYS MARINA

By: Nur'ul Afida Kamaludin

MANILA, Oct 29 (Bernama) -- An equitable partnership between the government and civil society especially non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is needed in combating the HIV/Aids epidemic in Malaysia, a symposium here was told.

President of Malaysian Aids Council (MAC) Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said neither side could hope to manage the epidemic without the other.

"The equitable partnership is important because the government has the human and financial resources at the macro level while the NGOs can provide the on-the-ground expertise and community support," she said.

Marina said this when presenting her paper on "Governance and HIV: The Interface Between Government and Civil Society" at the Satellite Symposium on Governance and HIV organised by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) at the 4th International Congress on Aids in Asia and the Pacific.

The symposium was participated by delegates to the five-day congress and government officials and NGOs members from Kuala Lumpur and New Delhi via teleconferencing facilities.

Six other speakers including Justice Michael Kirby from Australia presented their papers at the symposium aimed at sharing ideas and generate discussions on governance and HIV.

Marina, who is also the vice president of the Aids Society of Asia and the Pacific, said a more constructive and positive partnership between the government and NGOs could benefit all if a few lessons were adhered to.

Among them were the need for government and NGOs to understand the mutual dependence and accept that each other has a role to play, both sides should respect each other's expertise, provide more training on HIV/Aids for government officials, and NGOs should get rid of the culture of financial dependence on the government besides being more professional and efficient in their own management.

"NGOs also need to make clear to the government that their work is in the service of the country and not other parties. Often because of cultural and religious problems, some NGOs' work can be perceived as inappropriate and even unacceptable, and sometimes suspicion arise as to the agendas of the NGOs," Marina said.

She said the government-civil society interface, although often fraught with suspicion, was necessary and could be improved in fighting the epidemic which has so far infected about 23,000 people in Malaysia.

"If both parties accept that this partnership is vital to the management of HIV/Aids in a country, then they must work together to ensure that the relationship between them is a positive and constructive one in reaching the ultimate goal of preventing the spread of HIV in the country," she said.

Marina said MAC, the umbrella body for 32 organisations working in the field of HIV/Aids, had problems during its initial years in advocating the government for better prevention and education programmes and for the rights of People Living With HIV/Aids (PWAs) as well as the marginalised groups susceptible to HIV.

Earlier, Justice Kirby urged politicians in Asia to take bold action and "go beyond rhetoric" in protecting the rights of PWAs, saying that they could do so by partnership.

"They should form partnership across borders to learn from the best experience of best practice in those countries wich have been in the

frontline of the epidemic at an earlier stage of its impact," he said when presenting his paper "HIV - Why governance is so critical."

Kirby, who is also the president of the International Commission of Jurists based in Geneva, said urgent obligations were needed from all level of community in "the business of Aids (work) of saving lives." -- BERNAMA

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