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AIDS-Marina

MALAYSIA URGED TO SET UP CABINET'S ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON AIDS

By: Nurul Afida Kamaluddin

MANILA, Oct 26 (Bernama) -- The Malaysian government should immediately form a Cabinet's Advisory Committee on AIDS (Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome) to effectively curb the spread of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) that causes AIDS.

Malaysian AIDS Council's president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said Malaysia should put more serious efforts in battling the epidemic which had reached alarming situation with more than 21,000 people infected with HIV/AIDS throughout the country since 1993.

Speaking to Bernama after presenting her special lecture on Women and HIV/AIDS in the Developing World at the 4th International Congress on AIDS in the Asia and Pacific here today, Marina said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad should chair the committee with local AIDS experts as members of the committee.

"The committee must not only comprise medical experts but also NGOs which I think has wider experiences from all aspects in handling HIV/AIDS problems," she said.

Being an umbrella body for 32-non governmental organisations (NGOs) working in the HIV/AIDS field in Malaysia, she said the Malaysian AIDS Council wanted to share its knowledge and experiences in fighting the disease.

Marina said the Malaysian government did not have a proper plan in controlling the spread of HIV/AIDS compared to other Asean countries which had given priorities to the problem.

"I don't think that there is a proper and comprehensive planning for HIV/AIDS in the Seventh Malaysian Plan except for some actions to be taken by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development," she said.

She also said that Malaysia should take as example the Philippine's seriousness in battling the deadly disease by among others declaring 1997 as its National AIDS Prevention Year.

In her lecturer on the first of the five-day congress, organised by AIDS Society of the Philippines, Marina said the position of women in the developing world was made more precarious by the economic situation of the countries they lived in.

"Experience worldwide has demonstrated the epidemic is fueled by poverty, lack of information and lack of autonomy in sexual matters.

"These factors make all developing countries more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS than developed countries with high literacy level, sophisticated health system and greater independence of its people in making personal decisions," she said.

Marina said the role of socio-cultural factors in the AIDS epidemic on developing countries was major even in comfortable economic situation.

She noted that in rapidly changing societies such as the Southeast Asia, women faced greater challenges in protecting themselves from HIV infection than in stagnant ones because of rapidly changing norms and values.

Marina also spoke on Malaysia's problems in handling HIV/AIDS especially among its young people.

She said NGOs' campaigns had addressed the issue but find it difficult to reach the more than 10 million young Malaysians under the age of 21 in a population of 20 million.

As in many Asian traditional societies, the issue of sex education in Malaysian schools is a controversial one. "Despite having a well-thought and thorough curriculum, our Ministry of Education has not managed to deliver this education to all schoolchildren whether because of the fact that it is inserted into three separate subjects, the lack of training for teachers on these subjects or the fact that in an exam-oriented society, this subject is low-priority," she said.

Generally, she said the majority of Malaysian young people had little sex and AIDS education. -- BERNAMA

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