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AIDS-Marina

MARINA MAHATHIR TO ADDRESS AIDS CONFERENCE IN MELBOURNE

MELBOURNE, June 17 (Bernama) -- Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir will be among 300 speakers at the third international AIDS impact conference to be held in Melbourne from June 22 to 25.

She will talk about her role as head of a large network of non-governmental organisations active in Southeast Asia.

"The conference is timely in that we will be able to develop strategies for dealing with the AIDS epidemic in Asia," Dr Gary Dowsett, a prominent AIDS researcher at La Trobe University said.

He said the epicentre of the AIDS epidemic had jumped continents from Africa and was now looming in South Asia, at Australia's doorstep.

The executive director of United Nations Joint Programme on AIDS, Dr Peter Piot, will provide the conference with a global round-up of the HIV pandemic with emphasis on Asia and the Pacific.

Other speakers will focus on travel and sex work in Asia, AIDS and development and cultural responses to the disease.

"Australia's success story in controlling the epidemic can be a model for the region," Dr Dowsett said. "Over the past 12 years we have been able to reduce the rate of increase of HIV infection.

"We are one of the few places in the world where the disease can be thought of as under control."

Dr Dowsett said some of Australia's practices and policies had been exported to foreign aid programmes. "But the fast-growing epidemic in countries such as India and Thailand means that Australia may need to increase its leadership efforts," he said.

Dr Dowsett felt that international drug policies were partly responsible for the increase in HIV infection in Thailand and other parts of the Golden Triangle.

"Many drug users are now using heroin and needles rather than traditional opium pipes, for example, because the United States has clamped down on opium growers in the region as part of its war on drugs.

"By contrast, Australia acted very quickly to introduce free needle exchange and managed to contain the incidence of HIV among injecting drug users to 2.5 per cent compared to rates of up to 20 per cent in some other countries," Dr Dowsett said.

The Melbourne conference will be opened by the Governor-General Sir William Deane. -- BERNAMA

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