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## Thai war on AIDS bears fruit

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"PEOPLE, they look at me and see a condom," says the baby-faced Mechai Viravaidya.

Mechai needs little introduction. He is one of Thailand's best-known faces, was a former Minister, heads an NGO with an impressive track record, and is also known variously as Thailand's "Condom King" and "Mr Vasectomy."

And more recently, he has been credited for being the first to sound the alarm about AIDS in Thailand at a time when governments were still reluctant to be open about the problem, much less admit to an epidemic.

But what makes Mechai extraordinary is that he not only recognised the problem, but went on to get everybody to do something about it.

And the result has been astonishing. New HIV infection rates have fallen so dramatically that Thailand has become a model cited by the United Nations and consulted by other countries.

He has since been awarded the Magsaysay Award in 1994 for his role in this remarkable effort and, earlier this year, the United Nations Population Award.

Mechai met us in his Population and Community Development Association (PDA) office in the city centre on Queen Sirikit's birthday, a day when traffic flowed without a snarl through the streets of Bangkok.

Even the car park of the massage parlour next door was strangely empty, save for a red Ferrari.

The first case of AIDS in Thailand was detected in 1984. A few years later, Mechai, already known for his unconventional methods at promoting family planning, especially in the rural heart of Thailand, began campaigning against AIDS.

He pushed the government to sponsor ads on TV and radio to warn against AIDS, popularised the idea of condoms as protection against the disease, ran school seminars and conducted prostitute outreach programmes.

A great deal of his methods were unconventional but appealed to the Thai sense of sanuk of fun or playfulness (incidentally, eating, drinking, partying and sex are all part of sanuk).

Thus, he distributed condoms everywhere he went, got traffic policemen to hand out condoms during traffic jams and taxis to play cassette tapes on the subject and so on. He argued tirelessly on the economic and social costs of AIDS.

One can see how Thailand's preventive measures have worked so well - it is quite devoid of hypocrisy and false modesty. People here do not pretend that they are not interested in sex nor do they judge those who come forward for information or treatment.

For instance, Thai Red Cross AIDS Unit head Dr Praphan Phanuphak says that people who approach the unit to be tested for HIV/AIDS are guaranteed anonymity, a move that required some lobbying with the government.

Another important factor in the Thai experience is quite likely the absence of staunch opposition from the religious leadership.

Birth control is not an issue in Buddhism and Mechai has even persuaded the Chief Abbot to bless birth control pills and condoms before they are distributed to the public.

And in his earlier family planning campaigns, he got monks to chant, "Many births cause suffering, many children make you poor," after he came across a similar Buddhist scripture.

But it took some persuasion for the Thai government to face up to the disaster, being fearful of the effect on the tourism industry.

"In the beginning we tried to hide, like some other country I know. But during the 1991 government of which I was a member of, I said: look, the more we hide, the less serious it appears, the less money we put in, the less committed we are and more get infected. Let's be open, work on real projections."

He was quickly proven right. Each year since 1991 has seen a decreasing number of new HIV infections; in fact, new infections since 1991 has fallen by 77 per cent and is still dipping.

As of the end of last year, HIV infections are estimated at 900,000, a figure way below the 2.5 million projected had there been no concerted campaign.

"It has been a real victory," says Mechai.

According to Dr Praphan, a university study found that counselling and making condoms available to new army recruits saw HIV infection among them drop from four per cent to 1.9 per cent over a period of three years.

Today, the Thai Prime Minister heads the National AIDS Committee, a practice that began in 1991 with Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun whose Cabinet Mechai was part of.

Support from people at the very top, Mechai insists, is crucial.

The Thai royalty, as usual, has risen to the occasion. The Thai Red Cross' "10,000 baht can save a child's life from AIDS Fund" is headed by Princess Soamsawali, wife of the Crown Prince of Thailand.

Mechai's PDA is also trying to tackle the problem at source: stemming the rural-urban migration, especially of girls, from the impoverished north and northeast by helping them to improve their standard of living and creating alternative sources of income.

At the legislative end of the scale, an important Act aimed against prostitution has just come into force, 10 long years after the idea was first mooted.

"It took so long because we changed government so many times," quipped Dr Saisuree Chutikul, the woman who played no mean role in conceiving and delivering the legislature.

The Prostitution Prevention and Suppression Act, among other things, is tough on those who exploit children and people under 18 for sex be they pimps, clients, procurers or parents.

"The real work starts now ... seeing that the Act is really implemented," says Saisuree, who is advisor to the National Commission on Women's Affairs (NCWA) which is based in the PM's Office.

Thailand's sex industry is not something that most Thais are proud of. It is massive, with complicated and powerful links that are unlikely to be undone even in the distant future.

But groups like Mechai's PDA and Saisuree's NCWA at chipping away at it in their own way even as they are fighting the more immediate battle of AIDS.

\* Tomorrow: The Prince and the hill tribes.

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