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Cut in funds for war on AIDS will `worsen social impact`

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Cuts in government funding and the immense reduction in donations to HIV/AIDS causes will worsen the social impact of the disease in the future, the president of the Malaysian AIDS Council Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said today.

This, she said, was due to the reduced priority for HIV/AIDS causes when the nation was going through economic and political difficulty.

"It must be understood, that other issues, with good management and hardwork will eventually subside and hopefully even disappear.

"But HIV/AIDS, if related to low priority now, stands to restrict any full recovery from the current crisis that is hoped for and the problem will grow."

Marina was speaking at HELP Institute's 12th Anniversary lecture on "Priorities for public funding of HIV/AIDS programmes: Crisis in national leadership" at Pusat Bandar Damansara here.

According to Marina, in Malaysia, government grants to non-governmental organisations have been cut from RM 1.8 million in 1995 to RM129,000.

The Malaysian AIDS Council which used to be able to support itself adequately through national donors is now really feeling the sting of the economic crisis since it does not get much funding from international organisations.

It was time, Marina said, for Malaysians to be realistic about HIV/AIDS and the Government, institutions and the public should not deny or ignore its presence in society any more.

She remarked that advertising in the mass media was not effective since it did not get the right target audience, and that its messages were too general to inform and change people's attitudes toward the disease and its victims.

Also, she added, the council had not been successful in getting co-operation from religious institutions, particularly the Muslim institutions which were influential among the majority of Malaysian society.

"I suppose they think it's a question of religious values... We are trying to save people's lives here. We are not reflecting low moral values if we support the use of condoms and sex education in school."

The council is affiliated with the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism and 32 others.

Marina will also be the chair of the Organising Committee of the 5th International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific to be held here in October next year.

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