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Mahathir-AIDS

DR MAHATHIR CALLS FOR SUMMIT ON AIDS

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today urged heads of governments in the Asia Pacific region to hold a summit on AIDS.

Dr Mahathir said such summits would ensure better coordination of efforts in recognition of the transborder nature of the epidemic.

"This will show leadership in the region and within our own countries and underline the seriousness of the AIDS pandemic and the need for urgent action to combat it," he said when opening the Fifth International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific (ICAAP) at the Putra World Trade Centre, here.

Governments played a leading role because they set policy and facilitated the implementation of policy, he said, adding that political will would ensure that adequate budgets were directed at effective prevention programmes.

Present were the prime minister's wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah, Queen Ashi Sangay Chhoden Wangchuck of Bhutan, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng and Malaysian AIDS Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir. More than 3,000 delegates from 67 countries are attending the five-day Congress.

Dr Mahathir said political will also ensured that all sectors of society would play their part in fighting the HIV/AIDS epidemic, including the non-governmental organisations (NGO), businesses, religious bodies, schools and government departments.

"An effective government is one that understands that the virus recognises no borders and therefore it's imperative that governments cooperate with each other to fight the virus," he said.

Dr Mahathir said HIV travelled wherever human beings travelled, whether it was for pleasure or for work or because of political reasons (refugees) and man-made barriers could not really stop it.

He said what could stop HIV was cooperation between NGOs, governments and other health organisations to address the issues of cross-border movement of peoples, migrant workers and the trafficking of women and children.

"Governments working together is an example of good neighbourliness and also an example of the Asean philosophy of +Prosper-Thy-Neighbour+. Not working together implies a +Beggars-Thy-Neighbour+ attitude," he said.

In Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said, the government had responded to the HIV pandemic as early as 15 years ago when the first HIV victim was confirmed in 1986.

The government had spent almost RM43 million for the HIV/Aids control programme every year since 1993, he said, adding that about RM16 million went to curative services, RM5 million to healthy lifestyle promotions and RM22 million to preventive aspects of the programme.

Recognising that women were especially vulnerable to HIV infection, the government had created two nationwide programmes, namely screening of pregnant mothers for HIV, and Women and Aids.

"For this programme alone, the government has spent RM6 million since 1998 and as of May this year, about 25,000 antenatal mothers had been screened for HIV-infection, 100 cases turned out HIV positive, and were immediately given free treatment costing RM600 for each case per month," he said.

On the world front, Dr Mahathir said there are currently 33.4 million people now living with HIV/Aids and 1.2 million are children under 15 years.

He said what was more disturbing was that more than 95 per cent of all HIV-infected people lived in the developing world and 95 per cent of all deaths from AIDS occurred in the developing countries.

He said one of the reasons for such high percentage was that many developing countries did not have the resources to carry out effective prevention programmes due to crippling debts or political instability.

Dr Mahathir said recent attacks on the economies of developing countries had also made the fight against AIDS more difficult and, added that people could not afford treatment due to the high cost.

"But this high cost need not be so if developing countries can get together and challenge the pharmaceutical companies to reduce the prices or allow compulsory licensing of lifesaving drugs," he said.

On the congress, he said it was unique as it was the first time it was hosted by an NGO that works at the grassroot level, the first ever to be held in a Muslim country and the last major conference on HIV/AIDS to be held this century.

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