

AIDS council opposes mandatory tests

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Move will not help to curb spread of disease
even for migrant workers, says Marina

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The Malaysian AIDS Council opposes any form of mandatory HIV testing, even for migrant workers, as it is not an effective measure to curb the spread of HIV.

"Why would you want to force people to test for HIV? And if tested positive, what are you going to do for them?" MAC president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir asked during a question and answer session at the regional summit.

Marina, who presented a paper on *Cooperation between Civil Society and Governments in Regional Interventions with regards to Migrant Workers and HIV vulnerability*, was asked by Malaysian Trades Union Congress vice-president Indera Putra Ismail why she is averse to compulsory testing of migrant workers for HIV.

Indera had questioned why migrant workers, who may be HIV positive, are allowed to go around infecting others.

Marina said while the country wants healthy migrant workers, these workers too want to work in an environment where their employers are healthy.

She said transmission of diseases can happen two

ways and there is evidence that migrant workers too are getting infected from locals.

"Should we maybe screen all Malaysians first?" she asked.

Marina said foreign workers become more vulnerable to many diseases simply because of their lack of access to information and treatment, and their fear of being deported.

She said these workers are mostly single.

"Sometimes they are married, but all of them suffer from loneliness, being far from home for a long period," she said.

"It is not surprising therefore that they should seek solace in relationships with

local women or with local sex workers."

She said for HIV prevention to be effective, this need must be understood and the potential consequences of seeking sexual relationships confronted.

Marina said it must be shown that safe behaviours are beneficial to everyone as it protects the workers' health and enables them to work and send money home.

"HIV as we know is a transnational epidemic which recognises no borders and no government authorities.

"It travels wherever human beings travel, for whatever reason and can only be arrested when the circumstances that allow for unsafe human behaviour are also changed," she said.

Therefore, she added, it makes sense for cooperation between governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from both sending and receiving countries to provide more realistic inputs on the issues surrounding migrant workers with regards to HIV/AIDS.

Marina said HIV/AIDS is a disease that will not go away anytime soon and to avoid the devastation as witnessed in Africa, urgent measures including formation of partnerships "with various parties need to be taken to prevent it".