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'Help HIV/AIDS awareness drive'

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called on the private sector to help educate employees and the community on HIV/AIDS.

The Prime Minister said the Government would continue to provide a suitable policy environment for non-governmental organisations in this respect.

"But we also call upon the private sector, which in fact has the most to gain by preventive programmes, to support education about HIV/AIDS among their employees and in the communities," he said at the Red Ribbon Gala 2000 fund-raising dinner tonight.

Dr Mahathir emphasised the need for prevention, care and support programmes at the community level.

"I normally do not care for NGOs, especially those which only know how to demand others to do their bidding, but I make an exception with the Malaysian AIDS Council."

He congratulated the council for its commitment to enhancing the capacity of NGOs to carry out positive programmes, through financial aid or training.

He said heads of Government of the 10 Asean nations would meet next year at a summit to discuss the AIDS epidemic and the need for concerted regional action.

"This is a Malaysian initiative and I hope that this demonstration of political leadership on HIV/AIDS will result in increased attention by all Asean citizens."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians were fortunate that the country was not hampered by factors which had prevented many countries from responding effectively to the epidemic.

"But still the number of our citizens who have been infected continues to rise, with the concomitant suffering that their families and those around them are subject to.

"There is in fact no reason for this to happen in our country. But it happens because many are still unable to accept that HIV/AIDS is a disease that is among us and requires urgent attention."

He said too much talking had been done about the ways to respond to the epidemic.

In the meantime, he said, Malaysians continued to be infected as information they needed to protect themselves had not reached them.

He said HIV/AIDS was altering the global economic scenario, perhaps in a more unfair way than globalisation itself.

"It is clear from the global AIDS pandemic that countries suffering most from HIV/AIDS are those that are the poorest, the ones most crippled by debt, the ones least stable," he said.

"In addition, HIV/AIDS makes them even poorer because these countries have the least capability to provide treatment for those who have been infected."

Dr Mahathir said HIV/AIDS was a threat that was still "invisible" to the Malaysian public.

He said the survival of the HIV virus was dependent on the ignorance and denial by many that it existed.

He later presented 11 Red Ribbon Media Awards to members of the media for their work on HIV/AIDS in the print and broadcast media, and the arts.

Council president Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir said the awards were the

council's way of acknowledging the vital role played by the media in HIV/AIDS education.

Among the recipients were Lily Haslina Nasir from Jelita magazine, Lim Li Min (Cleo) and P.R. Thirumurugan (Tamil Nesan).

In her speech, Marina said despite the growing number of people infected with HIV daily, countries such as Uganda and Thailand had shown that it was possible to save lives through realistic prevention programmes.

In the two countries, she said the rates of infection were slowing down and in the case of Thailand, less than half the number of people predicted were infected with HIV by 2000.

"This means that we in Malaysia can do the same.

"By looking at the examples of Thailand and Uganda, which have implemented effective prevention programmes through a combination of strong political will, adequate resources and collaboration between the Government and private sector, we can also slow down the spread of AIDS."

Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali also presented the Dr Siti Hasmah Award to Persatuan Pengasih Malaysia in recognition of its contributions in the fight against HIV/AIDS in Malaysia.

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