

17/05/2001

AIDS: Whither the women?

Marina Mahathir

THE vulnerability of one group to AIDS - women - needs to be addressed urgently. Already 47 per cent of people infected globally are women, most of them young. The consequences of this are devastating. Millions of HIV-positive babies have been born to these women. Millions more become orphans once their mothers die of AIDS.

Society in many places is crumbling because of the loss of women to AIDS. Yet women continue to become infected especially in countries where they have a low social status. It is this low status that makes them vulnerable because they are unable to assume control over their own lives, unable to have educational and job opportunities, unable to choose who they marry, when and how many children they have ... In unstable countries or countries at war, where women are refugees and face violence, including rape, they are even more likely to be infected. In others, even when women are educated about HIV, they are unable to insist that their husbands or partners use condoms.

Protecting women therefore means changing societal attitudes towards women. The UNGASS seeks to highlight the changes that are needed to make prevention more effective.

At the same time, it will bring to the table core issues of care and treatment. As almost everyone is aware of by now, the types of treatment needed to control HIV in people are prohibitively expensive to the vast majority of people who need them.

Perhaps nothing shows up the great divide between the industrialised North and the developing South than the issue of access to the treatment of AIDS, where people in the North are able to survive while those in the South are dying needlessly early.

Lately, there have been many advocacy efforts to force multinational drug companies to reduce the prices of these drugs, and they have responded slowly with reductions limited to the most needy countries.

Some countries, such as South Africa, Brazil and India, have opted to produce generic versions of these drugs, in accordance with the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement of the WTO.

This was met by a misguided and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to sue the South African government by the multinational drug companies, and a threat to report Brazil to the WTO by the US government. This has only pitted the rich against the poor worldwide, and sympathies are definitely with the poor.

Harvard economist Jeffrey Sachs has condemned the Bush administration's contribution of US\$200 million (RM760 million) to the Global AIDS Fund, something that Kofi Annan has called shameful, as it amounts to about 70 cents per American. The other G8 countries are expected to follow the US lead and also contribute paltry sums. Yet the resources needed to truly mobilise the global effort for prevention and care is estimated at US\$7 billion per year.

The political will to combat AIDS is, in the industrialised world, sadly lacking. The UNGASS will be an event to watch because it will set the tone for the global response to HIV/AIDS for the next decade.

It will also set the standards for other events in response to HIV/AIDS including the ASEAN Summit Special Session on HIV/AIDS to take place in November in Brunei Darussalam, a Malaysian initiative. But an UNGASS Declaration of Commitment without teeth and without sufficient resources

will also mean a weak ASEAN declaration.

And with seven million infections already in South and Southeast Asia,
is just meeting and talking the best that we can do?

(END)