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Practicality, not abstinence, wins AIDS war

By Syed Nadzri

TWO women gave AIDS awareness a profound uplift this week: singer Macy Gray, who performed naked at a charity concert in London, and Vietnamese Minister Le Thi Thu, who launched a condom-vending machine in Hanoi.

Even though their endeavours took place almost simultaneously with the International AIDS Conference being held in Bangkok, their significance was never lost, including in Malaysia where some disturbing statistics and trends were revealed last week by the Malaysian AIDS Council.

Husky-voiced Gray sang to raise money, not for herself because she is already super-duper rich, but for Elton John's AIDS charity. It was reported that the American superstar was shod only in Jimmy Choos while rendering one of her numbers. She did this perched on a chair a la Christine Keeler.

Some reports had it that she got a standing ovation for her performance and that nobody could remember the colour of her designer shoes.

But on a serious note, it was sheer belief and commitment to a cause that won the day. Gray's devotion to the fight against AIDS stood out and Malaysians should take the cue - minus that kind of bravado. We don't have to strip but the dedicated spirit should be emulated.

Le, the head of Vietnam's Committee for Population, Family and Children, raised eyebrows, too. There was a picture of her in the NST last Saturday cutting a ribbon around a vending box that sells OK brand condoms for 500 dong, which is about 10 sen.

Selling condoms openly was a first for the communist country, which is as conservative as ours. It was hailed as a key step to fighting AIDS in that country.

The vending machines will be installed in men's toilets, which means that if similar machines were to be put up here, the condoms, at 10 sen each, will be even cheaper than the entry fees.

Condom machines are common in many countries, including some we would like to believe practise Asian values. Step into the men's room in a bar in Tokyo and chances are the vending machines, some selling cigarettes, some instant noodles and many condoms, will be there. In Bangkok too, such machines are as common as public telephones.

But over here, condom is a dirty word. Its mere mention is taboo, what more its physical presence.

Condoms may not go well with our modesty, especially among some Malaysians who, on one hand, insincerely prefer to keep discussions related to sex and certain parts of the human anatomy under wraps but privately go bonkers with pornography or when they are in a foreign land.

Let's stop the hypocrisy. Condoms may not be the best answer to controlling AIDS, but it is one of the most practical.

Malaysian AIDS Council president Datuk Paduka Marina Mahathir said last week that there needed to be a review of the AIDS awareness campaign being carried out here because figures show that there are more housewives and children infected with the disease in Malaysia than sex workers.

"We are not sending the right message," she said. "People should be made aware that AIDS can affect everyone. Husbands who had been infected with HIV will infect their wives while drug addicts can transmit the disease to their spouses and babies."

Now that is a tragedy.

Some people would like to believe that abstinence, rather than promoting

the use of protective measures, is the best way to deal with AIDS.

This policy, advocated by world leaders like US president George W. Bush and Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni, was widely debated at the ongoing Bangkok conference.

Fine. Abstinence is pure and unadulterated. It's what our grandmothers would like us to do. You can do it, I may be able to do it, but can that guy sitting in that corner or that girl living next door do it? Can they abstain?

Religious groups and some holier-than-thou NGOs have repeatedly objected to the promotion of condoms because they feel it might encourage sex out of wedlock and promiscuity among the young.

Yeah, right. Even without the liberal sale of condoms here, we still have a daily diet of rape, khalwat and other sexy news in the papers. Just yesterday we saw the big bold headline in the Malay Mail about an ongoing court case: "He pestered me for sex". So what are we talking about here?

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