

**Health Ministry caught in a religious bind**  
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Malaysia cannot openly promote condom use to prevent HIV/Aids because the mainly Muslim nation fears criticism from Islamic groups that it is advocating promiscuity, a top official said today.

The health ministry's deputy director for disease control said the government understood condoms prevented the transmission of HIV - cases of which are rising in Malaysia - but could not openly support it.

"It's based on people's sentiments. In Malaysia, we have Islamic religious groups who sometimes misinterpret our efforts in controlling HIV/Aids by using condoms," Jalal Halil Khalil told AFP.

"Condoms are normally associated with sex, and if you were to promote it, some of these groups might interpret this as promoting promiscuity," he said.

The health ministry earlier this year warned that Malaysia could face an HIV/Aids epidemic, with the number of infected people rising fourfold to 300,000 by 2015.

Of the 75,000 people with HIV/Aids in a population of nearly 27 million, about three-quarters are intravenous drug users, but heterosexual transmissions are growing. Most of the HIV/Aids victims are Muslims.

Sex is a taboo subject rarely discussed in public in the conservative nation. While HIV/Aids patients suffer from social stigma, Jalal said attitudes were slowly changing.

"People are talking about it more ... We need time because we cannot just rush ahead and promote condoms like our neighbouring countries like Thailand," he said.

### **Needle programme**

Jalal said the use of contraceptives was instead being advocated by non-government organisations and that the ministry was floating courses with Muslim leaders to talk about the virus - and condom use by implication.

"This is meant for the religious leaders and imams so they can educate people on what is HIV is all about, and how to prevent it. And of course you can't have prevention without condoms," he said.

Malaysia last year embarked on a five-year plan to curb the spread of the disease, including pilot needle exchange programmes for drug addicts and free antiretroviral drugs.

Jalal said there was a "hue and cry" from religious groups last year when those measures were introduced in the capital Kuala Lumpur, and in northern Penang and southern Johor states.

But the programme will be rolled out this year.

"We are going to extend this programme throughout the country," he said, adding that central

Pahang and northern Kelantan states will be next.

### **Working with NGOs**

Jalal was also quoted in today's papers as saying that the government understood that condom use prevented the transmission of HIV - cases of which are rising in Malaysia - but could not openly support it.

"We realise that we are an Islamic country and we have to do things carefully," Jalal told the New Straits Times daily.

Jalal admitted not being able to openly promote condoms would render prevention programmes less effective, adding the ministry was relying instead on non-government organisations (NGOs) to advocate condoms.

"It may slow down the effectiveness of prevention. It is difficult to promote the open usage of condoms," he told the Star newspaper.

"We let the NGOs do the work ... we use different ways of communicating it or else people will think we are promoting promiscuity," he said.

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