

At Red Ribbon Gala 2000

Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Kuala Lumpur 30 September 2000

First of all I would like to thank the Malaysian AIDS Foundation for once again inviting me to their premier fund raising event, the Red Ribbon Gala. I am given to understand that this Gala is held only once every two years although the last one was postponed due to the economic slowdown that our country experienced. Syukur Alhamdulillah, the country's economy has now recovered and the Foundation is once again calling upon the generosity of the Malaysian business community. I understand that the Malaysian business community has responded with great generosity, illustrating that corporate social responsibility is very much a part of Malaysian business life.

2. In the past few years our country has experienced some major challenges. Our economy has been attacked and internally we have also faced some significant threats to our stability, our communities and our way of life. It is not entirely a bad thing for us to face these challenges because they provide us with the opportunity to re-assess how we look at things and how we respond to things and in so doing we will hopefully learn something from the experience and emerge all the better for it.

3. It has been our good fortune that the threats we have faced have been visible and their results quickly felt and assessed and therefore we have been able to respond effectively. Of course they need constant monitoring and our responses need constant evaluation so that we remain forever alert and ready to defend our country from whatever challenges it may face.

4. But what if the challenge is largely invisible, and its effects not yet felt? Do we wait until we can see an enemy before we react or do we have the foresight to see far into the future in order to recognise an enemy even before it makes itself visible?

5. HIV/AIDS is a threat that is still invisible to the Malaysian public but it is nevertheless there. Already we have lost many citizens to an otherwise preventable disease because we have not been able to see the enemy. The enemy in this case is a tiny virus whose sole survival is dependent on the ignorance and denial by many that such a virus exists. HIV has been able to take advantage of all of man's weaknesses, but specifically man's unwillingness to accept the existence of what it cannot and does not want to see. And in so doing has wreaked devastation and suffering far beyond what man has ever been able to do by himself.

6. Consider this: in 1999, 200,000 Africans were killed due to conflict. But two million Africans died of AIDS. We may be able to see a human enemy, we may equip ourselves with expensive guns in order to fight that enemy but we cannot inflict the sort of suffering that a tiny virus can inflict.

7. This suffering is not limited to those who have been infected. 13.2 million

children around the world have become orphans because of AIDS. In some countries in Africa, life expectancies have been shortened by some 20 years and the entire demographic picture of those countries have changed. A generation, those in the young productive ages have been lost and the impact on countries cannot be easily rectified. Essentially, AIDS is an impoverishing disease for countries because it strikes at the very people who can help to develop a country.

8. In addition, AIDS is altering the global economic scenario, perhaps in a more unfair way than globalisation itself. It is clear from the global AIDS pandemic that the countries that are suffering most from AIDS are those that are the poorest, the ones most crippled by debt, the ones least stable. In addition AIDS makes them even poorer because these countries have the least capability to provide treatment for those who have become infected. The net result is that the gap between the rich and the poor, the North and the South, becomes even wider.

9. In Malaysia, we are fortunate in that we are not hampered by some of the factors that have prevented many countries from responding effectively to the epidemic. But still the numbers of our citizens who have become infected continues to rise, with the concomitant suffering that their families and those around them are subject to.

10. 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 that requires urgent attention. Too much talking and handwringing has been done about the many different ways to respond to the epidemic; in the meantime, Malaysians continue to become infected because the information they need to protect themselves has not reached them.

11. It is time to stop talking and start acting. At every level of society, whether on the part of Government or on the part of civil society, there has to be a realistic and effective response. At the very highest levels of Government, there is already a move to face the epidemic squarely in the face. In 2001, the heads of the Government of the ten ASEAN member nations will meet at a summit to discuss the seriousness of the epidemic and the need for a concerted coordinated 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.

12. I cannot emphasise enough the need for prevention, care and support programmes to be done at the community level. This is where the impact of the epidemic will be felt most and where such programmes are needed most. 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, an NGO. I congratulate the Malaysian AIDS Council for its commitment to enhancing the capacity of non-governmental organisations to carry out positive programmes, whether through providing financial aid or through training. We also welcome the role of the Malaysian AIDS Council in bringing to the table issues which, because of the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, remains hidden,

and for assisting the Government in advocating for a more just and equitable access to the expensive anti-retroviral drugs through compulsory licensing and parallel importing. This is definitely an issue on which the Government and the positive NGOs can work together for the good of our country.

13. The Government will also continue to play its role in providing a suitable policy environment for the positive NGOs to play their role and we will support such NGOs as much as we can. But we also call upon the private sector, which in fact have the most to gain by prevention programmes, to support education about HIV/AIDS among their employees and in the communities, as you are doing tonight. We need to do this jointly, between the Government, NGOs, the private sector and the media. Only then can we truly avoid the negative effects of this dreadful epidemic.

14. I also understand that tonight we shall be honouring several journalists, artists and special people who have all done their bit to help educate the Malaysian public and bring issues related to HIV/AIDS to the fore. I would like to congratulate all the winners and hope that they will continue to contribute to the national effort to fight this epidemic by disseminating accurate information about HIV/AIDS.

15. Lastly I would like to call upon all Malaysians to open their eyes to this invisible enemy, known as HIV, and the need for urgent action. Let us stop having endless discussions on what are the real reasons for AIDS in our country. The fact is that while we talk, the virus does its work and we will always be several steps behind in controlling it. Let us not see the epidemic in hindsight when it is too late but rather have the foresight, the vision, to see that urgent action now can forestall a future darkened by this tiny invisible enemy known as HIV.