

The Red Ribbon Gala 2002

Shangri-la Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, 5 October 2002

I would like to congratulate the Malaysian AIDS Council on its 10th Anniversary this year, and the launch of its year-long fund raising campaign, " In the Name of Love

2. In the past ten years, the number of people infected with HIV in Malaysia has risen from about 5,000 reported cases in 1992 to more than 45,000 in 2002. Last year alone, almost 6,000 new people were found to be infected. Clearly the prevention efforts made thus far have not been as effective as we would like. We should perhaps study what has worked elsewhere and adapt them here and discard what has not worked

3. In addition, more than 4000 people have died of AIDS-related causes, leaving behind widows and orphaned children who face bleak futures due to the stigma attached to them. Some of these deaths were unnecessarily hastened because of lack of knowledge about available treatments and the unaffordable cost of treatment

4. Treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS has become an increasingly serious and urgent issue because with 40 million people infected with HIV, the impact on countries of their illness and deaths will be devastating. The issue of treatment has illuminated very starkly the harsh realities of the world today, where the haves in the North are able to survive while the have-nots in the South perish. This inequality must be righted

5. I am pleased to see that all over the developing world, governments and NGOs have stood side by side to advocate for fairness in the issue of drug pricing so that the large majority of the world's HIV-infected people will have access to treatment. We are looking at all possibilities to make these medicines available to the poorest of the poor, from negotiating with the pharmaceutical companies to reduce prices, to invoking our rights to compulsory licencing and parallel importing. Some people may not like our doing this, saying that we are not respecting intellectual property rights. But surely our people's lives are more important than huge profits for already rich companies

6. I understand that the theme for this year's World AIDS Campaign is Stigma and Discrimination. The fact that a campaign theme such as this is necessary is an indictment of humankind, because such attitudes are the result of ignorance, fear and denial. In Malaysia I have been told these attitudes still exist and result in people with HIV/AIDS being thrown

out of work, HIV- positive babies being refused shelter and some people being denied treatment or neglected. In our hopes to build a caring society by 2020, we need to examine such negative attitudes and make every effort to eliminate them. We must understand that such prejudices say more about ourselves than about those we discriminate against

7. Last year the ten Heads of ASEAN governments issued an ASEAN Declaration on HIV/AIDS. This event was a significant one not only because it was the first time that the Heads of Government had discussed an issue such as this but also the first time that NGOs have been involved in the process towards the Declaration. In the process both sides have realised the need to work together on this common problem, to complement each other in order to implement a more holistic approach to prevention, treatment, care and support

8. Here in Malaysia, the government acknowledges the role that NGOs are playing in the fight against this epidemic. We realise that in some areas, the government has limited effectiveness and only NGOs have access to those vulnerable groups at the grassroot levels. However we support NGOs by providing funding and I am happy to reiterate an earlier announcement that the government has agreed to provide RM40 million over the next ten years to the Malaysian AIDS Council to run the programmes of its 37 affiliates

9. Money may help but it is not everything. To truly combat this epidemic and prevent its negative social and economic impact, every member of society must play its part. It is not just up to doctors, policymakers and NGOs only because AIDS affects all of us in one way or another. Therefore I am pleased to see the turnout tonight and to see that the private sector is also playing its part by supporting this cause. I would especially like to commend Petronas, DRB-HICOM and Telekom Malaysia for their generosity

10. My congratulations once again to the Malaysian AIDS Council and Foundation and wish you greater strength and commitment in order to alleviate the impact of this terrible epidemic on our country. I hope that in 10 years' time we will be able to congratulate ourselves on a job well done, where our efforts have paid off in saving the lives of Malaysians so that we may all be able to enjoy our Vision 2020 together.