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"REPRODUCTIVE AND SEXUAL HEALTH"

Praise to the Almighty for his blessings of peace, good health and goodwill that has enabled us to gather here in Kuala Lumpur for this landmark event as IPPF celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. On behalf of all of us in Malaysia and as a former volunteer of the National and State Family Planning Associations, I congratulate IPPF for your pioneering role in spreading the message and services of family planning throughout the world and especially in developing countries. I would like to extend our traditional greeting of SELAMAT DATANG to all of you who have travelled from all parts of the world to share a common vision and mission of engaging in a fruitful exchange of knowledge and experiences and to realise a common aspiration to improve the reproductive and sexual health of needy populations in our countries.

2. I am really pleased to see the participation of such a distinguished group of participants, speakers and representatives of the international community here. The best way to move forward in Asia Pacific is for us to share and share quickly what strategies could work and which do not. We know that there are outstanding and emerging priority issues of Reproductive and Sexual Health in the Asia Pacific region that cannot wait for wheels to be reinvented in terms of programme strategies, diagnostic and treatment facilities, management and care and so on. We need to harness the benefits of research and field experiences to energise our efforts to confront problems and to scale up interventions and initiatives. I am happy that this seminar provides such a forum for exchange of your rich experiences from the global, regional, national and especially field initiatives.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

3. I am sorry I could not be with you yesterday due to a call of national duty, but having been involved in the area of public health especially family planning and maternal and child health for the major part of my career as a physician and health officer, the professional part of me and my life brings me here today to join you in this important plenary session on "Beyond Awareness Raising - Improving Responses to HIV/AIDS and Other STIs".

4. The complexities of the epidemic of HIV/AIDS with negative traits attached to it such as stigma, discrimination, drug affordability, isolation, loneliness and despair of infected and affected persons can only be resolved if we adopt a positive and healthy attitude towards the problem and treat every affected individual humanely with the dignity and care they deserve. We can no longer sweep problems under the carpet of social, cultural, religious or economic constraints and barriers and we need to address them openly and objectively.

5. I am pleased to know that IPPF has placed HIV/AIDS as a priority issue of reproductive and sexual health, that you are focusing on adolescents and the young and that you have worked considerably in the area of adolescent and youth reproductive and sexual health including programmes for sex education. I strongly believe in prevention and control and in starting from the young as I have seen the grim and bleak situation of communities and families in some affected African and Asian countries where children no longer have access to the right to a healthy and happy childhood and upbringing because their parents are too sick, too financially drained or have succumbed to the infection, leaving their children as orphans.

6. The recent report "Children on the Brink" states that Asia has the largest number of orphans due to its large population and that about two million have been orphaned due to AIDS. We also know that half of all new infections are occurring in the 15-24 age group and we need to empower young people to make wise decisions for themselves. "We know what to do, but we must do more on a broader scale", said Suman Mehta, UNFPA's HIV/AIDS Coordinator. She is one of the plenary speakers today and will tell us more about how we can be more responsive and effective to slow down the infection in Asia Pacific. I also look forward to listening to the other speakers and I am sure we will benefit from their experiences.

7. Before I conclude, let us have a minute of contemplation to remind ourselves of how lucky we and our families are to be able to enjoy good health, peace and freedom when many families, women and children in the world are affected by disease and infection or suffer from the calamities of war, civil strife and disasters. I have witnessed the sufferings of rape of refugee women in Bosnia; of deprived, malnourished and sick women and children in Iraq; of orphans in the Pakistan border and of refugees and migrants from neighbouring countries. They have only us and organisations such as yours to help them ease their difficult times for basic survival and I hope you continue to support them on humanitarian grounds. The memories of Afghanistan are still fresh in our minds while we continue to see the disturbing daily scenes in Palestine and Israel.

8. On this note, it is also my fervent hope that organisations represented here will promote the significance of peace and tolerance without which we will not make any gains in our health and development efforts. I will not dwell on the Malaysian scene as the Minister of Health has given you a glimpse of our efforts to safeguard the health of women, children and families in this country.

9. I end by congratulating the organisers - the East and South East Asia and Oceania Region and South Asia Region for bringing together a wealth of expertise in reproductive and sexual health that would lead to a successful and beneficial outcome and follow-up. We pray for continuous commitment and dedication of IPPF and partner agencies to advance steadily and bravely to bring about future generations who are enlightened and empowered to improve their reproductive and sexual health and quality of life.

Thank you.