

**Opening Speech by
His Excellency Thaksin Shinawatra
Prime Minister of Thailand
at the Opening Ceremony of
the XV International AIDS Conference
Bangkok, 11 July 2004**

**Your Excellency Mr. Kofi Annan,
Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Professor Joep Lange, President of the International AIDS Society,
Conference Organizers and Co-organizers,
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

On behalf of the Government and people of Thailand, I am very pleased to welcome you to Bangkok and to our country.

It is a great honor for the Thai people to host this very important Conference -- a Conference which is solely dedicated to the global fight against HIV and AIDS. Just a little more than two decades ago, scientists made the first discovery of HIV and AIDS. Within this relatively short period of time, AIDS has taken away more than 20 million lives, a figure that surpasses any single cause of death in our modern history. In addition, more than 40 million people are currently living with this virus. In Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe -- in every continent, and in every country -- it is painfully clear by now that HIV and AIDS are threatening the lives of people throughout the world.

Despite an abundance of knowledge on how to prevent HIV, and in spite of significant medical advancement in the treatment of AIDS, there are still too many new infections every day. There are still too many people with HIV and AIDS, who are needlessly suffering from the diseases. In many places, HIV and AIDS have virtually wiped out the fruits of development gained during the past 20 to 30 years. Alarming enough, it seems that HIV is still in its infancy and is likely to continue to spread, rather than to go away by itself.

What I have just mentioned to you is happening almost everywhere, and Thailand is not immune from this situation. We are aware that there are still many groups of people who need more attention, with regard to both prevention and care services. The epidemic among injecting drug users in our country is a prime example of such phenomenon.

When I became aware of this situation, I immediately instructed all relevant agencies to review their past practices and to look for more effective interventions. Today, our laws and regulations have changed, for the better, I must add. In the past, drug use was treated like a crime, which warranted severe punishment. At present, our mindsets have changed, and we now see drug users as patients, who require our support and treatment. We are now implementing a "Harm Reduction Program" to reduce the risk of HIV infection among injecting drug users as well as to provide appropriate care for injecting drug users with HIV. The program has been constructed, and will be conducted, through concerted collaboration among several UN agencies, government bodies and non-governmental organizations, including the drug user network.

I believe we do have hope. As a matter of fact, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Along with all the tragic stories involving HIV and AIDS, we have also learned many success stories in the prevention of HIV, and in the treatment and care for AIDS from several countries. This is perhaps a key reason why we are all here today – to learn from one another's success and failure, with a view to utilizing our diverse experiences for the benefit of the international community at large.

Allow me, therefore, to use Thailand as an example, and to recount to you some stories from the Thai experience.

When we first faced the problem of the HIV epidemic among sex workers and their clients, we realized that immediate action needed to be taken. We mounted our response through the so-called "100 percent condom program". The program's strategies focus on door-to-door education among sex workers, and distribution of free condoms in order to promote the use of condoms in every sexual act. As a result, the rate of condom use has been significantly raised from a very low level to more than 95 percent in just a few years. This has been maintained up to the present. At the same time, HIV infection rates among sex workers have dropped from 30 percent in the mid-1990s to less than 10 percent today. It is estimated that this simple program has averted more than 5 million infections among the Thai people.

The transmission of HIV from mother to child is another problem that has caused us deep concern. In order to prevent this, we established a program which has effectively reduced the infection rate from 30 percent to less than 3 percent by providing free Anti-Retroviral agents and other services to HIV-infected pregnant women. I am pleased to note that this program has protected more than 2,000 babies from HIV every year.

Although we have been quite successful in our prevention programs, the sad fact remains that there are still large numbers of HIV infections among the Thai people. We have developed comprehensive care services, which cover the treatment of opportunistic infections to all in the Universal Health Assurance Scheme, but this is still not enough. All of them need more intensified and proper treatment and care. With this in mind, I assigned the Government Pharmaceutical Organization, or GPO, in 2002 to develop and produce more Anti-Retroviral agents, or ARV, in order to provide affordable treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS. In this regard, I have to praise the initiative of the GPO in developing a three-drug combination medicine, which has brought down the price of effective regimen to just only 1,200 baht, or about 30 US dollars a month. This development enabled my Government to declare a universal coverage policy on ARV treatment earlier in this fiscal year. The initial target is set at 50,000 cases to be accessible to ARV, and we hope to do even better in the future.

We have allocated more than 20 million US dollars for this project, aimed at covering 40,000 cases, or about 80 percent of all cases. The remaining 20 percent will receive ARV from a budget supported by the Global Fund, so all cases will have access to this treatment.

**Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Although most people have read about the AIDS pandemic, or viewed pictures on television, there is absolutely no substitute to seeing the problem with your own eyes. Only then, can you grasp the enormity and seriousness of the predicament facing us. I would like to share with you some of my personal experience in this matter.

Two weeks ago, I went up north, back to my home town of Chiang Mai, and, there, I visited a project providing care for children who are HIV infected. I was told that, 2 years ago, before the ARV program was universally implemented, many children were ill. As a matter of fact, a large number of them were in critical condition and, finally, they passed away.

During this trip, I had the opportunity to hold many AIDS-infected children in my arms. When I touched them, and looked into their innocent eyes, I felt something very special and very unique. It is a feeling that confirms my

Government's decision on the ARV policy. With access to ARVs, all of these children are now healthy. They can now run, play, sing, and, just like other children, they can go to school. I have also visited other projects providing ARV care for adults. It happens to be the same.

Based on the evidence witnessed with my own eyes and reinforced by close personal contact, I would like to declare, here and now, -- in front of you all -- that I will never cease my commitment to support universal coverage of Anti-Retroviral treatment to people with HIV and AIDS. It is the very least we can do.

I know this is a very challenging task, but I am confident that we can provide free ARV to all. I will instruct the GPO to expand its production capacity and to develop more items. Based on this expansion, we can provide assurance that people affected by AIDS in Thailand will, no doubt, be accessible to ARVs.

But we live in an interdependent world, and there is no satisfaction in being happy, while your neighbors are in difficulty. With this in mind, and in a stage in which we have just recovered from economic crisis, we are now in the process of offering support to our neighboring countries for ARV treatment. When our economy becomes even stronger, I would like to extend this support to our friends in other regions as well. We are looking ahead towards closer and mutually beneficial cooperation that will save the lives of people in other countries participating in this collaboration.

I would therefore like to urge all governments around the world to do their utmost to provide ARV treatment to those who need them. We are in an emergency situation. Without ARV, some 8,000 people will die from AIDS every day. Some may be our friends, our neighbors, or even someone we love. But with ARV, we can immediately put a stop to this dismal problem.

I would also like to urge all relevant international agencies to provide greater assistance to the countries facing a high number of HIV/AIDS cases. Donor countries should work harder to secure more funds, and pledge such funds for the fight against HIV/AIDS, including the use of ARV. In this connection, I am proud to inform you that, even though we are a small country with a relatively small economy, my Government has decided to donate one million US dollars per year for 5 consecutive years to the Global Fund to fight AIDS, TB and Malaria. We hope that there will be a larger budget donated to the Global Fund, and that the Fund will be able to provide more essential financial assistance to the countries in need.

Let me add that, I am now thinking beyond the ARV program. When people with HIV and AIDS have been brought back to their healthy lives, this is not the end of the story. They also need to go back to work, and to re-enter the mainstream of society. Therefore, my Government has created a new program aimed at vocational training and supporting them with jobs to earn income for their families. This program should be along the same lines as the ARV program.

However, whether this program will work or not depends also on the acceptance of the general public towards people with HIV and AIDS. I would therefore like to call on all the people in Thailand and throughout the world to give a chance to people with HIV and AIDS. Give them an opportunity to live and work and lead a normal life in their communities, as they are truly one of the members of our society, just like you and me.

In addition to the care provided for people living with HIV and AIDS, my Government is also focused on the provision of care for orphans affected by AIDS. This project is very new and has been implemented for only one year. However, even in a short duration, we have been able to provide scholarships to more than 13,000 orphans. We hope that, with this assistance, these orphans will be able to continue their education until they are grown enough to earn their own living. Access to knowledge and education is something that must be available to all.

**Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

We are living in the AIDS era. There is no doubt that history will record our response.

There is no time for complacency; no time to rest on our laurels. It would be a crime to let HIV continue to spread, while we already know how to interrupt it. It would be an even greater crime to let people suffer from AIDS, without any access to treatment, while effective medicine is readily available. We cannot ignore the reality that there are still large numbers of people with no access to information and prevention products. All of these reasons merely serve to underscore the significance of the theme of this Conference, "**Access for All**".

Before concluding, I would like to express my warmest welcome to you once again. I appreciate the dedication and perseverance that all of you have displayed in participating in this Conference, especially those who have traveled

a long distance. I do believe that, as a result of this Conference, we will certainly achieve our target of “**ACCESS FOR ALL**” in this crucial fight against HIV/AIDS.

I now have the pleasure to declare the XV International AIDS Conference open, and wish you all every success in your deliberations.

Thank you very much.
