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Speech of the Executive Director

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by

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Thank you for inviting me to this second Asia-Pacific Ministerial Meeting on HIV/AIDS. It is an honor to be here with Prime Minister Shinawatra, the United Nations Secretary General, and all of you.

This week, UNAIDS released its new Global Report on AIDS, and it documents an epidemic that is growing increasingly severe. As our ability to accurately measure the scale of the AIDS epidemic improves, we are continuing to see a relentless increase in new infections and death. More people became newly infected with HIV in 2003 than in any previous year.

Sub-Saharan Africa remains the most severely affected region, and it presents a cautionary tale about what happens when a deadly virus is combined with inadequate leadership. We are now witnessing the full impact of AIDS on the African continent: whole generations are growing up without families, and social stability is increasingly threatened.

Another example of AIDS exploiting a leadership vacuum is in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Injection drug use is fuelling AIDS in the region, but the epidemic is increasingly spread through sexual activity. 80% of those infected are under 30. There are virtually no public information campaigns, and national budgets for AIDS prevention and treatment remain wholly insufficient.

AIDS has entered its globalization phase: It is a disease of mobility, and it is taking advantage of globalization to spread. No country or region is immune. The myth that Asia is somehow sheltered from AIDS has been revealed as only a myth. The epidemic is expanding rapidly in the region – 1.1 million people became newly infected last year, and now one in every four HIV infections in the world occurs in Asia -- one out of six in India.

With 60% of the world's population, Asia's fast-growing epidemic has global implications.

Increased numbers of infections are primarily due to large increases in China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, but the epidemic is spreading elsewhere as well. In Oceania, comparatively small numbers of people infected translate into high percentages of those populations - a real threat to the future of whole cultures. Papua New Guinea is already evolving into an Africa-like scenario. If it can happen there, it can happen to other countries.

Many epidemics in the region are concentrated among injection drug users, commercial sex workers, and men who have sex with men, but there are increasing signs of spread into general populations. A study from UNAIDS and the Asia Development Bank published this week shows that an additional 10 million Asians will be infected by 2010 unless a comprehensive response to AIDS is established.

Another major trend is the feminization of AIDS. Globally, half of all people infected with HIV are women. In Africa, 60% are women. In sub-Saharan Africa, women are 30% more likely to be infected with HIV than men. In Asia, new trends indicate the same imbalance may happen here.

Political, Socio-Economic and Security Impact

Asia is the region that has recently made the most progress against poverty and which is enjoying a dynamic economic expansion -- we can't let AIDS jeopardize that. SARS

and bird flu taught us how much devastation a disease can have on economies and security – AIDS has been more silent, but its long term effect may be more devastating here. The choice is invest now or pay much more later. The cost of inaction is very high.

Resources for AIDS

Global spending on AIDS has increased 15-fold from US\$300 million in 1996 to just under US\$5 billion in 2003 -- but is still less than half of what will be needed by 2005 in developing countries. The resource gap for Asia and the Pacific is enormous: last year, only US\$200 million was invested for AIDS while at least US\$1.5 billion was required. Another US\$5 billion per year will be needed to fight the epidemic between 2007 and 2010.

Major donors must help, but affected countries themselves must come up with more funding.

The Lagging Response in Asia

There have certainly been success stories in Asia, but today the region is still behind in several aspects of its response to AIDS. Only 2% of women in the Western Pacific have access to services to prevent mother-to-child HIV transmission; few adults in South-East Asia who need voluntary counseling and testing can get it; in South-East Asia, only 16% of an estimated 2.2 million commercial sex workers receive basic prevention.

What happens on this continent will determine the future of the epidemic, but the window of opportunity is closing. Greater leadership is needed urgently. But let's be clear that challenging political decisions, requiring political courage, are ahead. Decisive action is needed to: address, in a compassionate way, the prevention needs of commercial sex workers, injection drug users, and men who have sex with men; enact policies that do not drive vulnerable groups underground, but rather encourage them to come forward for prevention and care; and, invest adequate national resources.

But it's not just about the money. We need to make sure funds are spent wisely. Each country ought to have one AIDS action framework, one national AIDS coordinating authority, and one agreed country-level monitoring system. These principles – called the Three Ones – are what are needed to really put countries in the driver's seat.

Role of UNAIDS

UNAIDS stands ready to help you by supporting your efforts to build sustained political leadership through the Asia Pacific Leadership Forum on HIV/AIDS and Development; helping you identify effective ways to reach out to vulnerable groups; serving as a global knowledge fund that helps countries get access to best practices and enact evidence-based policies; and, assisting with monitoring and evaluation.

The Need for Leadership

If Asia and the Pacific fail to act promptly to establish comprehensive prevention and care programmes we can expect the following scenario: a total of 10 million adults and children will be newly infected in the region between 2004-2010; the annual death toll will increase to over 750,000 by 2010; yearly losses to the region will equal US\$ 17 billion; millions of people will be impoverished, and Millennium Development Goals will be unattainable.

However, with the necessary resources and leadership, the course of the epidemic in Asia can be changed. You can avoid six million new infections by 2010; the death toll can be reduced by nearly 100,000 people each year; annual financial losses can be limited to US\$ 15 billion by 2010.

The warning signals are clear – now Asia must choose how to respond.

Thank you.