

Speech

**Male Sexual Health and HIV in Asia and the Pacific
International Consultation**

New Delhi, 26 September 2006

**Recorded closing address by
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Dear colleagues and friends, good evening.

You have my sincere apologies for not being able to deliver this message in person.

But I am happy that I met many of you last month at the Toronto pre-conference session on advancing a global agenda on HIV and men who have sex with men, at which I had the honour of giving closing remarks.

We all know that June 5th this year marked a grim 25th anniversary – the discovery of AIDS, among 5 gay American men.

And we all know how tragically and fundamentally this epidemic has affected the world in this quarter-century.

But these 25 years were also witness to gay men and other hardest-hit communities taking a stand against AIDS, despite rejection, stigma, discrimination and violence. In giving the world the first real HIV prevention successes, the gay community has shown what community response to AIDS is all about – and how essential activism is to pushing governments to act responsibly on AIDS.

I am increasingly convinced that this 25th year will also be remembered for being the year in which country after country began to turn the tide on AIDS.

The most crucial sign of progress is the decline in HIV rates in an increasing number of countries in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, particularly among young people. In other words, HIV prevention is working!

Another welcome sign is that 1.6 million people are accessing antiretroviral therapy in developing countries.

And, not least, worldwide commitment has been mobilized to scale up every element of HIV programmes towards universal access.

So for the very first time in 25 years, we have the resources, the political commitment and the public concern needed to begin turning the tide on this epidemic.

We must collectively use this opportunity to end, once and for all, the killing failure to make the AIDS response work for gay and other men who have sex with men.

We have to ensure that one of the highest priorities of every national AIDS effort is to reach all men who have sex with men with comprehensive HIV services tailored to their needs and concerns.

We have to ensure that the commitment is not just rhetorical, that it is backed by participation in national AIDS bodies, substantial funding and translation into reality on the ground, so that men who have sex with men can avail of effective HIV prevention, HIV treatment, care and support services.

And not least, we have to ensure that homosexuality is decriminalized everywhere, and that homophobia, discrimination and violence against sexual minorities and women are made illegal and socially unacceptable. There can be no effective response against AIDS where men who have sex with men do not enjoy full human rights protections.

Friends, I am confident that we will succeed now even though homophobia remains powerful. So strong that in the Political Declaration on HIV/AIDS adopted in June, a large number of governments refused to allow recognition of sex between men and of every

individual's inalienable right to be safe from HIV – an abdication of responsibility that Secretary-General Kofi Annan and I have condemned.

I am confident because more and more governments and societies, in Asia-Pacific and worldwide, are beginning to live up to their obligations to protect all their citizens from this epidemic.

There are many examples of stronger government, donor and civil society commitment and partnerships in the policy brief on men who have sex with men released by UNAIDS at the Toronto AIDS Conference.

And recently, India's National AIDS Control Organisation has supported a legal effort to overturn the law that criminalizes same-sex relations, and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and other eminent Indians have written to Parliament and the public to ask for an end to this law. I have great hope that these efforts will lead the Indian courts, government and Parliament to remove Section 377 from the penal laws and set an example for other countries.

Friends and colleagues, we cannot allow any delay.

We must make sure that the AIDS response is made to work fully and effectively for men who have sex with men.

In every single aspect of your courageous efforts, I can assure you of my continued personal commitment and the support of the entire UNAIDS family.

Thank you and my best wishes to you.