



# Turning the Tide On AIDS in Asia

*by Peter Piot*



**S** O OFTEN WHEN we talk about AIDS, we refer to what the U.S. government calls “next wave” states. Some are countries with low prevalence rates but large populations such as China or India. If an epidemic were to take off in one of these countries, it would have a tremendous destabilizing effect—damaging development, economic growth, exacting a human toll on all parts of society in the region.

For several years now we have been sounding the warning of this oncoming threat and fearing the worst. Today that fear is tinged with hope. Having just come from Yunnan province in China where injecting drug use is one of the primary drivers of HIV infection—I am seeing the formation of complex solutions to complex problems. The governor is leading the charge with comprehensive prevention efforts targeted at high-risk populations in a province of 44 million people. He is mo-

bilizing all sectors to implement these strategies and recognizes this is a critical moment. There is an opportunity to get it right and let the wave pass by. Or get it wrong and watch it wreak havoc.

Of course some countries have struggled with the virus for decades. Thailand and Cambodia have managed to curtail and begin to reverse the epidemic. Now the hard work of long-term planning begins. India’s creation of a national AIDS council, which the prime minister himself chairs, and Vietnam’s recent elaboration of a national AIDS strategy also are positive examples.

Some of these same countries, including India, China and Thailand, fund their own national AIDS budgets, thus insuring lead-

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ership is vested in delivering on outcomes.

The United Nations is keeping AIDS a high priority, too. Because of the exceptionalism of AIDS an effective response will be crucial to meeting any of the Millennium Development Goals. Toward that end, the Joint U.N. Programme on HIV/AIDS, will co-sponsor the Seventh International Congress on AIDS in Asia and the Pacific in Kobe, Japan. Hundreds of policy makers, scientists and members of NGOs from 50 countries will share and debate strategies for getting and staying ahead of the AIDS epidemic.

I urge political and business leaders to pay attention. While we must give credit where credit is due—we have not yet turned the tide. The current economic losses are significant. Last year alone, AIDS killed more than half a million of the region's inhabitants, many of them skilled workers in the prime of their productive lives.

In South and Southeast Asia, targeted HIV prevention programs reach only 19% of sex workers, 6% of injecting drug users and no more than 2% of men who have sex with men. Similarly, only 8% of risky sexual acts involve use of a condom. In Southeast Asia, no more than 6% of people who need antiretroviral therapies have access to them. Throughout Asia and the Pacific, a minimal number of people have been tested for HIV.

Papua New Guinea is facing a major crisis with prevalence rates continuing to climb. Equally troubling are the signs of complacency. The reduction of prevention efforts in Thailand could reverse one of the world's greatest AIDS successes. The Philip-

pin's AIDS budget has fallen sharply since 1998. And the stigma of AIDS continues to discourage people from coming forward to receive treatment and counseling about how to prevent HIV from spreading.

Asia and the Pacific is fortunate in that more than 99% of its people remain uninfected. A comprehensive response is a good investment for both the region and its economic partners.

There's no one-size-fits-all strategy for a so large and diverse a region. However, there are many basic and well-established principles for success, including leadership at the highest political and social levels, community mobilization, female empowerment, education and, most important, universal access to prevention and treatment.

Sixty years ago, the economy of Asia and the Pacific was a war-exhausted shambles. Today it's a juggernaut. It grew 7.2% last year, its best performance since 2000, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. It's predicted to grow another 6.2% this year. It needs the high growth to increase the living standards of its 3 billion inhabitants, many of whom are among the world's poorest.

But there's nothing inevitable about it. Any number of contingencies could knock the big wagon off of its wheels—including AIDS. We've known for a long time that HIV and AIDS aren't things that must be. Rather, they're things that may be. Either we ignore the problem or pay lip service to it, or we address it as the societal and existential threat that it is. Echoing the highest leadership in China, the AIDS epidemic has

reached a new and critical phase and so must the response. We will need bold policies that bridge the perception gap between social welfare and public security. In truth, there is no contradiction between making a society more secure and protecting it from a deadly microbe. Both are difficult problems that countries must solve for the public good. For example, by scientifically addressing the serious HIV consequences of injecting drug use with evidence-based methods, countries may also be able to reduce, rationalize or redirect their expenditures on security.

There's growing emerging leadership in Asia on AIDS issues. The partnership between the Thai Business Coalition and Thai government is an early example. I see four key milestones that can only happen if the private and public sectors join together.

✿ *We must ensure that AIDS receives the same level of attention and concern by the world's leaders as they give to global security.* In every key policy-making body, the AIDS epidemic needs to be taken up as regularly and with as much scrutiny as the most urgent security threats and crises are.

✿ *We cannot rest until we have ensured universal access to both HIV prevention and HIV treatment.* This needs to be the world's most urgent goal. It is our only hope to ensure that today's children can grow up in a world free of AIDS.

✿ *We must make the money work.* We have moved from millions to billions of dollars and we must ensure that money reaches people on the ground, who need it most. Only by breaking down barriers and working in a coordinated manner will we reach the most vulnerable and make a difference. That means all actors working from one national plan, with one national coordinating and one monitoring and evaluation system—what we call the Three Ones.

✿ *AIDS will not be eradicated in the foreseeable future.* And just as businesses rely on long-term forecasts and analysis—we too must fully incorporate a long-term horizon into planning for the AIDS response. From research and development of a safe and effective microbicide, that can be controlled by women and an HIV vaccine, to ensuring access and delivery systems and infrastructures are in place for current antiretroviral therapies and new technologies when they become available.

Ten centuries ago, King Canute went down to the sea with his court to command the waves to halt. The waves kept on breaking. But an AIDS-induced wave is something altogether different. Determined leaders who carry out right policies, marshal adequate resources and ally with businesses, civil society, governments and international organizations, could have tremendous impact. They could, in a sense, halt the waves. ■