

I am very pleased to be here at the launch of Viet Nam's National Month of Action for HIV Prevention and Control. I am especially honoured to co-chair along with Dr Nguyen Thanh Long, an exemplary leader who has worked hard to broaden the vision and strengthen the role of VAAC in the national response.

Viet Nam has continued to make strong progress since last years World AIDS Day, including a new and therefore much wider and stronger National month of action this year.

As you know, Viet Nam's National Month of Action on HIV is inspired by World AIDS Day, a global day of awareness that is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. I would like to recognize and praise Viet Nam for stepping beyond international norms and expectations to commemorate the response to HIV, not just on a single day or a week as many nations do, but throughout an entire month of action. This shows the commitment and care of the Fatherland Front, the Ministry of Culture, Sport and Tourism, and the Ministry of Health. It also shows the energy and mobilization of individuals, communities and civil society to respond to a truly national issue.

Before discussing the themes and objectives of the global campaign, I would like to give you a brief overview of the global epidemic and Viet Nam's situation vis-à-vis its neighbours.

Every year, approximately 7000 people contract HIV, more than 1000 of whom are in Asia. Sub-Saharan Africa is most affected by HIV, but the epidemic is spreading quicker through Asia than through any other place in the world. It does not show any signs of slowing.

The epidemic is not the same everywhere. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, transmission is most common through unprotected heterosexual sex. In Asia, HIV is usually caused by unsafe drug injection, as well as unprotected sex work and unprotected sex between men.

What this means is that in Viet Nam, prevention can work. Really work. By getting information and services to those people that really need them – people who are more likely to have risk behaviours – the HIV epidemic can be contained and reversed.

This is a major opportunity that Viet Nam must not miss. We heard from Dr Long on the significant progress and success Viet Nam is having in scaling up prevention services.

I am confident, that Viet Nam will not miss this chance to prevent the growth of the HIV epidemic and reduce its impact on individual, family and community futures, finances and hopes. The Vietnamese people have a long, impressive history. The longer I live in Viet Nam,

the more I am humbled by it.

What moves me most is the capacity of the Vietnamese people to pull together and work as one united community in the face of challenges and oppression. No wonder, then, that this year's National Month of Action calls upon the Vietnamese people to launch a grassroots, community-based response to the challenge of HIV, an issue affecting all 63 provinces.

Continuing on last year's theme of leadership, this year the global and national campaign calls upon all members of society to "Stop AIDS. Keep the Promise;" and to "Lead, Empower, Deliver."

The first part of that message, to 'lead', does not refer just to high level leaders in the Government. As your history has shown, everyone can be a leader. A movement only has power when it is based in the community and guided by solidarity. We need leadership at all levels and within all sectors. As shown in Viet Nam as well as internationally - most effective leadership begins at the grassroots and pushes up.

For example, you journalists must take the lead to report accurately, respect confidentiality and speak out against stigma and discrimination. Healthcare workers must treat all clients equally, regardless of HIV status. Teachers must help communities respect the right of children affected by HIV to attend school. Policemen must support health and social programmes that target drug users and sex workers. Employers must keep people living with HIV employed and provide access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services in the workplace. All community members must know how to prevent HIV, act on this knowledge and accept people living with HIV as valuable, integral members of society. There is no reason to fear HIV! It can be prevented. Community members must spread the word that HIV is not difficult to prevent if you have access to the information and services you need – like condoms and clean needles and syringes. We need to dispel fear, speak openly, and put an end to blaming others. People living with HIV and key populations at higher risk must take the lead as much as possible because they are the ones with the insight to inform programmes and policies and make interventions more effective.

National, provincial, district and commune leaders are also important. They must ensure HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services are available to vulnerable populations.

We will hear in a moment about HIV care and treatment from Dr Fujita. I agree with him that these services are vital and Viet Nam has made great progress in increasing ARV provision by at least six fold. Nevertheless, we need a major focus on prevention to make savings for the future. Resources put into prevention have a huge, long-term effect on reducing the social and economic costs of HIV to individuals, families and communities.

This means that ministries, provinces, districts and communes must make it easier for injecting drug users, residents of closed settings, sex workers and their clients, men who have sex with men, mobile populations and people who live in remote and mountainous areas to access information, prevention services and treatment and care.

Viet Nam has laws and policies that promise that access. Promises, however, must be kept. It is up to all members of the community to show leadership and make sure rights are respected and laws implemented.

The second message of the National Action Month on HIV, 'empower,' is about supporting one another, and especially people living with HIV, to take control of their lives and get involved in the response.

National, provincial, district and commune leaders must facilitate and support the work of So Y Te, NGOs and other ministries to implement programmes. Family and communities must support those affected.

The media role in this is crucial. You journalists must take the lead to break the silence around HIV. When reporting, you need to take care to use language carefully and check your facts. You must emphasise that it is unsafe behaviours, not people, that spread HIV.

Very importantly, you should always bear in mind that in accordance with the Law on HIV, the identity of people living with HIV, affected by HIV, or belonging to a population at higher risk must, by law, be kept strictly confidential.

The third message of the National Month of Action on HIV is to deliver on promises made.

One of the greatest successes we have seen this year is the commencement of Methadone treatment for IDUs in Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City. I would like to recognize and congratulate national leadership for taking this forward and supporting its expansion into Ha Noi.

The increase in civil society action is another great success.

Members of civil society have shown leadership and empowerment by founding self-help groups and the National Network of People Living with HIV. The Viet Nam Business Coalition on AIDS is also in the process of being set up.

Government has made strong steps in empowering civil society to participate in programmes and access funding, establishing the National and the Ho Chi Minh City AIDS Associations and reporting on the epidemic to global partners.

The issue now is to focus on continuing to increase progress, implementing the laws, policies and programmes that prevent HIV, provide treatment and care and safeguard the rights of people living with HIV. Globally the media are encouraged to support accountability by reporting on law violations and monitoring how members of society are keeping their promises and report positive examples of activities being implemented in the communes.

In closing, I would like to thank VAAC for organizing both this event and the national month of action. I would also like to urge participants of today's launch – and especially the journalists

present – to work together to follow through on the call to lead, empower and deliver on our promises to stop HIV. Thank you again and chu suc khoe.