

Your Excellency Deputy Prime Minister Truong Vinh Trong; honourable ministers; representatives of the Fatherland Front; Youth Union; Women's Union; distinguished delegates from ministries, agencies and provinces; my international colleagues; ladies and gentlemen,

As UN Resident Coordinator, I would like to thank you for this opportunity to address you today on behalf of the international community in my role as co-chair of the Ambassadors/Heads of Agency Informal HIV Coordination Group. In doing so, I would like to especially thank the National Committee for AIDS, Drugs and Prostitution Prevention and Control for inviting the international community to this meeting, as well as to the previous one in Hai Phong. We deeply appreciate the openness and partnership that this builds and reaffirm our collective commitment to supporting your very important work in coordinating efforts to address HIV, drugs and sex work.

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As we have heard, 2008 the year of the Rat - was indeed an active year. Rats, as you know, are passionate, clever, and determined animals. Accordingly, 2008 saw the National Committee, and in particular Deputy Prime Minister Trong, take the lead to steer the national response to HIV; to guide MOH, MOPS, MOLISA and other agencies present today to make those hard decisions that are necessary for Viet Nam to meet its international commitments and bring global best practices into the national response to HIV.

This has not always been easy, and the international community would like to voice its strong support for the National Committee and personal praise, for Deputy Prime Minister Trong's tireless efforts to seek broader knowledge and insights, whether from cutting-edge drug and HIV experts in Australia, from Methadone clinics in Hong Kong, or from community-level assessments of the methadone pilots in Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City. Thank you also, for sharing such knowledge in events like the high-level July Symposium on Understanding Drug Dependency as well as the review of the methadone programme tomorrow.

The international community very much recognises the important work done in 2008 to build bridges between Government ministries, the international community and other partners. At the High Level UN Meeting on AIDS held this past summer in New York, Deputy Prime Minister Trong was the most senior representative from all across Asia. I assure you that this fact was not lost on other delegations and the senior government and United Nations leaders with whom

he met.

Truly, 2008 then was a year of outstanding leadership. And also impressive results!!

During the Year of the Rat, as Minister Trien highlighted, Viet Nam significantly expanded access to condoms, clean needles and syringes, Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission and anti-retroviral medicines. The collection and use of strategic information also increased. We now know more than ever before about key populations at higher risk. We know more about injecting drug use, and more about sex work – so much so that as Minister Kim Ngan said this Friday there will be a meeting, which will review the Ordinance on Prostitution Prevention and Control. More is also known about men who have sex with men and last year plans were made to develop guidelines on providing HIV services for them.

As far as we were concerned the 2008 National Month of Action on AIDS was the most impressive yet, with 3000 communes holding simultaneous events. Community organizations became more active, leaders sprang up on HIV from the most unlikely places, and people living with HIV stepped to the fore, forming innovative networks and new self-help organizations.

Also in 2008, the Government of Viet Nam took the Ha Noi Core Statement a step further by endorsing the Accra Agenda for Action. In response, the international community has made progress in meeting the Government's expectations for more streamlined coordination by supporting the One M&E Framework and made efforts to abandon a business-as-usual approach.

Perhaps, most importantly, in 2008 this leadership culminated with methadone clinics breaking ground in Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh City. Not only does this achievement push Viet Nam well within the ring of regional leaders, it vividly demonstrates the National Committee's care and concern for the Vietnamese people. On behalf of the international community, I would like to congratulate you warmly this morning on what you have achieved and on the compassion shown to communities coping with drug dependency. As your partner, we are sure that many Vietnamese families will benefit from the expansion of the programme.

While today's ever deepening economic and financial crisis continues to prove how difficult it is to forecast the future, I am confident that there are at least four areas where we can predict continued change this next year.

First, I believe we will build on the strength of our successes and enhanced partnership by expanding multi-sectoral coordination. By this I mean recognizing the strengths, the roles and needs of all the diverse partners in the national response to HIV: Government ministries; civil society groups; the private sector; the international community; people living with HIV and key populations at higher risk. I hope that in 2009 the National Committee will convene at least two meetings as partnership forums with the international community and civil society, including people living with HIV. These will provide a great opportunity to jointly coordinate support and ensure the most effective use of our collective resources.

Secondly, I predict that the outcomes of the methadone pilots in Hai Phong and Ho Chi Minh

City will compel the National Committee to scale it up – at first in Ha Noi, and then in many other provinces. As you are aware, methadone is internationally recognized as the world's single most effective treatment for opiate dependency. If the report we will discuss tomorrow is as expected, we will hear of former drug users contributing to the good of their families and communities, staying healthy, staying out of crime, starting jobs, saving hundreds of thousands of dong every day for their family and the community, and returning the bruised love of their parents and children...In truth, I find it very hard to foresee the Buffalo neglecting methadone in 2009.

Thirdly, I also predict that we will face a number of new opportunities in 2009. For one, the National Programme of Action on Children and HIV will soon be ready for implementation. I encourage the National Committee to better protect the children of Viet Nam by supporting this important programme. Viet Nam's report on its global UNGASS HIV commitments is also due by the end of this year, and I envision that Viet Nam will repeat, and even strengthen, the excellent progress that was made in 2007 when civil society was a key partner in the reporting process.

That being said, many challenges remain. As we heard from General Anh both drug abuse and drug trafficking remain issues of great concern for Viet Nam as trafficking is taking place in an increasingly complex manner, across borders by land, sea and air. Drug use has been increasing in Viet Nam as a consequence of the continuous influx of illicit drugs smuggled into the country from neighboring countries. Changes in life styles and social norms, and unemployment and recent job losses due in part to the crisis, are other factors behind escalating drug use.

Amphetamine Type Stimulant (ATO) Drug Abuse is increasing, especially in large cities and among young people and is already a serious problem in neighboring countries. It is very important that the government takes effective measures with the support of the UN and international partners before the problem spreads more widely to the youth in Viet Nam.

In this regard, Viet Nam taking a productive role will also have important implications to the regional drug effort in which Viet Nam is a key partner.

Regarding the current drug treatment programme provided in the closed residential detention settings and very high relapse rates, significant examination and reconsideration to adopting more effective drug treatment approaches are called for. Internationally available evidence has shown that involuntary incarceration is ineffective.

In brief, Viet Nam has a unique opportunity to effectively address its current problem through more widespread use of methadone and adoption of more diversified, evidence-based treatment approaches.

What's more, Viet Nam has the opportunity in 2009 to renew its efforts to meet its targets on Universal Access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services by 2010, and also to achieve MDG No.6 by 2015. This is a huge challenge and, to be honest, as things stand, without significant effort in this year ahead there is little chance of full success.

Fortunately though for the people of Viet Nam, the buffalo is much larger than the rat! Your goals are indeed daunting but not impossible. We – and by ‘we’ I mean the international community as well as the Government – we need to put more effort into building a truly multi-sectoral response. Ministries, donors, educators, civil society, people living with HIV, police officers, the media – we all need to find more effective ways to share information and resources and work together for common goals.

Unfortunately, as we are all only too painfully aware, the global economic crisis is getting more serious by the day both necessitating new policies to protect the most vulnerable and a recalibration of previous growth predictions. While Viet Nam is still on a path to middle-income status, it is clear that progress will be slower than all of us would have hoped. In this context, I appeal to those donors considering scaling down their support after 2010 not to do so as it is too soon now to reduce support for HIV programmes. I also urge the Government of Viet Nam to clearly step up its own commitment to HIV funding.

Further, we must all, as members of the Country Coordinating Mechanism, ensure that Viet Nam applies for and distributes Global Fund monies to all partners in the response, in line with their responsibilities. I encourage all present today to think about how best to craft a more targeted, cost-effective response to HIV as part of the on-going review of the National Strategy, one that will ensure all sectors and levels receive the resources they need to fulfill their mandates.

Of course, at the end of the day, nobody can predict the future, especially in these turbulent times -- the future will be as we make it. The women and men sitting in this room today have the weighty yet very privileged responsibility to make a better future for millions of Vietnamese. I am sure that you will succeed and we stand by as your partner to support you in your effort.

Your Excellency, Deputy Prime Minister Trong, distinguished guests and colleagues, thank you once again for giving me the opportunity to address you today on behalf of the international community. I wish you all the best for a lively and productive meeting, both today and also on Friday as we have heard.

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