

Your Excellencies Deputy Prime Minister Truong Vinh Trong, Health Minister Nguyen Quoc Trieu, Members of the National Committee for AIDS, Drugs and Prostitution Prevention and Control, Leaders of Viet Nam Women's Union, Leaders of Provincial Party, People's Council, People's Committee and People of Thai Nguyen, Colleagues and friends, Ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the Joint United Nations Team on HIV in Viet Nam, thank you for inviting me to join you this morning. I am happy to be back in the beautiful city of Thai Nguyen, where I came for my first World AIDS Day in Viet Nam in 2007. It is wonderful to see so many representatives of different sectors and organizations of various levels, as well as people from multiple generations, all gathered here at this important time in Viet Nam's multisectoral response to HIV. Being with you all of you today and seeing the economic growth and progress achieved in Thai Nguyen over the past more than three years reminds me of the reasons why you have been trying hard over the last 20 years to prevent and control the spread of HIV in Viet Nam: to ensure the good health of each and every Vietnamese citizen, and to contribute to the development and prosperity of the nation.

On this 20th anniversary of the national response, I congratulate you, and commend Viet Nam, for the achievements gained so far in responding to HIV. Viet Nam has one of the best laws on HIV and a legal framework for protecting the rights of people living with and affected by HIV. Viet Nam has a harm reduction program, including Methadone treatment that is expanding quickly across the country. This is preventing HIV infection among people who inject drugs and to help drug users to break their habit. In addition, more and more people living with HIV in Viet Nam are receiving treatment that allows them to live long and productive lives. And prevention of mother-to-child transmission has been strengthened with a month-long national campaign each year, with the aim that by 2015 no child is born with HIV in Viet Nam.

I have just come back from Dien Bien, where Deputy Prime Minister Truong Vinh Trong invited international partners of Viet Nam to see firsthand the province's efforts to reduce poverty and curb a serious HIV epidemic that is expanding from injecting drug users and into the general population. I was deeply moved by His Excellency's great leadership and dedication as well as the resolution of the Party and Provincial People's Committee to expand a truly multisectoral HIV response.

In Dien Bien we also met other brave leaders in the response against HIV: women living with HIV who are supporting each other and speaking out to break the stigma and discrimination faced by adults and children living with or affected by HIV; and also former injecting drug users who are now dedicated to helping their friends to avoid HIV infection. Over the past years in Viet Nam I have met many Vietnamese people in many places like Thai Nguyen and Dien Bien who are dedicated to the response against HIV. I admire your leadership and great efforts in working towards universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support services.

As the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon recently acknowledged in his visit to Tu Liem district health centre with comprehensive HIV services in Ha Noi, you are not only preventing the further spread of HIV and reducing deaths from AIDS, you are achieving much more. You are giving life to people who will contribute to the development and success of Viet

Nam.

I congratulate and thank you all, but I must also ask you to do more.

We are nearing the end of 2010 – the deadline set to realize the universal access targets that Viet Nam committed to four years ago – and still not everyone in need is receiving HIV services. Nearly half of all people living with HIV in need of treatment still go without it. Only one in four pregnant women gets an HIV test and only one in three HIV-positive mothers gets treatment to reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to her child. While today there are 50 per cent more voluntary counseling and testing sites than there were five years ago, and condoms and clean needles and syringes are more easily available than ever before, HIV continues to spread among people who inject drugs, sex workers, the clients of sex workers, men who have sex with men, and their intimate partners.

You might be thinking – but what more can we do? How can we close these big gaps?

The answer is in the theme of this year's National AIDS Action Month: universal access and human rights. Viet Nam's laws protect the rights of people living with and people at higher risk of HIV – but we need to ensure the laws are well understood, respected and enforced at all levels, by all people. The key is to reduce stigma and discrimination. People at risk dare not take an HIV test or suggest wearing condoms with their spouses because they fear being identified as practicing 'social evils'. People living with the virus hide their status for fear of being rejected by society. The darkness of stigma and discrimination still surrounds HIV in Viet Nam, allowing the virus to hide and spread. We must shine a light on it and pay more attention to the highest priority issues in order to maintain the achieved results and quicken progress towards universal access and the Millennium Development Goal of halting and reversing the HIV epidemic by 2015.

First, focus more on prevention. This includes further expanding harm reduction programs, especially Methadone, and to make services easily available to drug users, sex workers, the clients of sex workers and men who have sex with men.

Second, mobilize more diversified resources for the HIV response, including increased domestic resources, and to use all resources more effectively. All Viet Nam's achievements in responding to HIV and its efforts to reach international targets will be threatened if sustainability of the response to HIV is not ensured.

This is all very difficult, but it is not impossible. We can do it. Under the leadership of the Deputy Prime Minister, we must all make a personal commitment, to keep the promise to stop HIV. Ho Chi Minh once said: 'Without the people's commitment even the easiest task is impossible, with the people's commitment the impossible becomes feasible'.

Please participate in AIDS Action Month events. Invite your colleagues, friends, family and neighbours to join you and share with them the messages from today's event. If you do this, you will be helping your fellow citizens to have better health and a better life, and contributing to the bright future of Viet Nam.

Thank you and chuc suc khoe.