

*Sunday 25 November, 2007 Phap Van Pagoda, Ha Noi, Viet Nam*

Good evening and thank you for inviting me to attend this beautiful ceremony and for giving me the opportunity to address you. We are here tonight to honour those who have passed, to give condolences to those who are grieving, to show our solidarity with all those affected by HIV, and to act on our hope that the future will be better.

In 2006, there were an estimated 283,000 people living with HIV in Viet Nam. Since 2005, 14,300 people have died every year from AIDS-related causes. If access to treatment does not improve, the number of deaths will be 30,000 per year by 2010. (MOH, 2006) These numbers are just unacceptable. They are unacceptable because each number represents a beloved and irreplaceable father, sister, mother, brother or child; each number represents 30 or 40 family members and friends who have been devastated by loss.

Tonight we burn incense and ask our ancestors to recognise our efforts to develop Viet Nam and struggle against HIV. We promise them that we will do all we can to fill the gaps they have left behind in our lives and our communities. When we burn the names of our ancestors, that smoke rises into Heaven. But on its way it passes over the living and through their houses and their trees, touching them. No one grieves alone. No one has been unaffected by HIV.

Tonight we understand that the way to fight this disease is to have compassion, from our hearts, for those affected. We must never practice or condone discrimination. We also understand now, in our heads, that simple measures can be taken to safeguard our health: access to condoms, clean needles, care to pregnant mothers and newborn children, ARV treatment and education will slow this epidemic.

Our loved ones in the other world passed away because they, and we, did not understand these things. Now that we have this knowledge we burn incense, we pray, and we make a promise here before them tonight that we will work diligently to make up for what we did not know before. We will stop this epidemic and we will continue constructing the beautiful Viet Nam that they dreamed of.

As Ho Chi Minh himself once said, "Remember, the storm is a good opportunity for the pine and the cypress to show their strength and their stability." Now is the time for the people of Viet Nam to show the world, once again, how strong you really are.

We are here tonight to pray and to honour the dead. But the best way to honour those we have lost is by serving the living. The best weapon against today's agony is action. Our ceremony here tonight, on the eve of World AIDS Day, is a call upon all of us to act. A man far wiser than I – the Buddha – said, "I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act."

The theme of this year's World AIDS Day is leadership. Please remember that any one of you can be, and is a leader. A leader is someone who shows personal commitment to stopping AIDS. A leader is a courageous individual – a hero. I believe that every Vietnamese person is a hero.

All those affected by HIV need and deserve their community's support, understanding and love.

Take the lead to model equality and tolerance through your words and actions. Take the time to talk, touch and listen to a person living with or affected by HIV. Insist that PLHIV are central to all efforts to fight HIV.

We are here tonight as one people, joined by one heart and working together with one mind. We are here tonight as leaders and heroes. We are here tonight to burn incense out of love for the deceased and compassion for the living, to pray for the souls of all Vietnamese and to make a promise that is unbreakable – as unbreakable as a pine in the wind – a promise to our ancestors and our children that we will take the lead to do anything necessary and everything possible to stop AIDS.

We will keep this promise.

Thank you and good night.