

## **Keynote Address of the Honorable Francisco T. Duque III during the Philippine AIDS Dissemination Forum 2009**

Heritage Hotel, Manila  
9:00 am December 18, 2006

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### GREETINGS

- o Dr Soe Nyunt- U Country Representative, WHO
- o Undersecretary Mario Villaverde,
- o Director Eric Tayag, NEC
- o Dr. Ferchito Avelino, PNAC

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Fellow government workers, other guests, civic organizations and NGOs, other partners in the HIV/AIDS community ...good morning to everyone.

Thank you very much and on behalf of the Department of Health and all the member agencies and nongovernment organizations of the Philippine National AIDS Council, let me welcome everyone to the 2009 National Dissemination Forum for HIV/AIDS in the Philippines. This morning we are presenting new data on HIV/AIDs to know more about our epidemic and its changing trends, so that together, we can mount a stronger and a more focused response that reflects the greater urgency with which we need to confront it.

Nothing in the current trends of new HIV/AIDS infections in the country suggests that we are facing a waning AIDS epidemic. In fact, we may be in for a ride. Although we now see unparalleled momentum in the responses against HIV/AIDS with the way we have consolidated a broader, multisectoral national response over the past decades, the number of people living with HIV continues to grow in the Philippines. We may have the financial, medical, and technical building blocks to curb the epidemic, but overall rates of HIV/AIDS are going up nationally based on the latest report which NEC will announce this morning,

HIV/AIDS is gaining momentum. It is spreading fast in the most at risk populations at a pace that we haven't seen before and at a rate which can put unsustainable burden on our country for decades to come.

It is emerging as one of our primary health and development concerns with the real and imminent danger that the AIDS epidemic can become explosive and spill over larger communities. We have seen that in many of our Asian neighbors, a low-level HIV/AIDS epidemic can become a concentrated epidemic in so short a time. We cannot and should not wait for that to happen. That is the greatest tragedy.

Ladies and gentlemen, in 2007, we reported an overall HIV prevalence in the most at risk populations in the Philippines of 0.09%. That number is now up to 0.53 % which means that the overall prevalence in the high-risk groups ballooned 5 times in just a matter of three years. While the reported national average of HIV/AIDS cases is still below the 1% red mark to make us a high prevalence country, the rate of increase is alarming and the swiftness with which AIDS is spreading in persons with high risk behaviours tell us that we are not doing enough. Indicators that serve as red flags of HIV and AIDS epidemic like increasing number of new HIV cases, growing size of local pool of HIV, high level of needle sharing among People Who Inject Drugs (PWID), high prevalence of risk behaviors, high STI rates and low level of knowledge on HIV and AIDS point to the fact that the HIV and AIDS epidemic in the Philippines though considered as low, is growing at an alarming rate. As of September this year, the HIV and AIDS Registry of the Department of Health have recorded a cumulative total of 4,182 **cases**.

Thus, we may be missing this very narrow window of opportunity to push back HIV/AIDS, the best and only time that we, in fact, can afford to do it.

Unchecked high-risk behaviours are fuelling the AIDS epidemic. Every day, around the country, we now have 2 new infections among populations most at risk when in 2000, we used to report only one case every three days. Although the most common mode of transmission is still through un-protected sex, other risks like transmission through sharing injecting equipments, blood, occupational exposures and mother to child transmissions were also documented.

The Philippines must indeed work doubly hard and reorient national strategies to tackle HIV/AIDS. The next Medium Term Plan must accelerate a broader, a more targeted, coordinated, and a more strategic response to target special groups where this storm is now building --- men having sex with men, injecting drug users, sex workers and the youth who will become the adults of tomorrow. The new phase in the country's HIV response must scale up coverage for these populations so that they can take responsibility in the choices and behaviours that they make that will shape the future of HIV/AIDS in the Philippines.

This morning, let me also announce, and I am directing the DOH and all member agencies and NGOs of the Philippine National AIDS Council to revisit the country action plan and programme against HIV/AIDS. We need to review the gains and misses of the past 25 years in combating HIV in the Philippines. We have been successful, I believe, in terms of building a coherent national AIDS response with one shared plan and vision under one national authority through the PNAC. And our actions have been guided by a single monitoring and surveillance framework which we continue to improve to give us the best evidence for action. We have worked with development partners like the WHO, UNAIDS and UNICEF, civic groups and NGOS to make antiretrovirals free and accessible to patients. We have expanded the entry-points to HIV prevention including Voluntary HIV Counseling and Testing (VCT), STI Diagnosis and Treatment, Linking HIV services to existing Maternal and Child Health Services and augmenting the capacities of Social Hygiene Clinics in the LGUs. We are also slowly engaging the private sector in the clinical management of HIV.

However, we have not maximized the strength of our partnership to deliver to full capacity and at full-scale the known interventions against HIV that will help us sustain the momentum and force back the AIDS epidemic entirely. We have not done so especially in terms of PREVENTION which requires that we work more closely with other sectors beyond health and muster unprecedented leadership to overcome the underlying political, cultural and social drivers of HIV/AIDS.

Ladies and gentlemen, HIV/AIDS in the Philippines is in a highly vulnerable point. Injecting Drug Use, for instance, is a nidus of the potential explosive growth of HIV in the country. Like the experience of other countries such as Russia which now have 1 million HIV infections, lack of timely action for this special group of IDUs can silently but surely spark a more massive AIDS epidemic --- a greater human tragedy to millions more of potential victims.

Drug-related HIV/AIDS is firstly a public health issue. But it is also powerful indicator of societal disintegration and disharmony. It is a reflection of our shortfalls to tear down the stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV/AIDS and illicit drug use. It speaks of our failure to move from denial to action...to implement what is needed to keep the epidemic at bay through prevention and harm reduction campaigns which have been successful in other countries like Thailand and Cambodia.

Thus, without good prevention programs scaled up to effective coverage... without pushing available evidence in the face of social

and political sensitivities to address the needs of people living with HIV/AIDS... risks that lead to HIV can trigger a national AIDS crisis far beyond what we ever thought was possible. We therefore have to move quickly and early to implement HIV prevention within a comprehensive national AIDS response.

**Prevention must be top priority.** And we must have the courage to forge ahead amid controversies... with greater focus and intelligence...to deal with the complexity of HIV/AIDS. A mix of preventive strategies --- and not single-strategy solutions --- implemented over the long term is as important and necessary as combination drugs to halt the epidemic.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are now in the position to make or reverse the history of HIV/AIDS in the country. The challenge is to get ahead of the epidemic and to build the largest constituency for action. **The way to deal with HIV is not just through the health sector or the DOH.** An energized movement to fight AIDS in the Philippines will demand sustained action at all levels of government, business, civil society, communities, families and individuals.

Until it is beaten, AIDS must remain a permanent political priority, led at the highest level in every community; we must secure financial allocation towards meeting our objectives on prevention and control; we must overcome the weak capacity of the health and other social sectors; we must ensure universal access to lifesaving essentials; we need to ensure that true partnerships are at hand, with other government agencies, people living with HIV (PLHIV), the most vulnerable groups, civil society, faith-based organizations and business sector; we must face and overcome other factors essential to the explosion of epidemic like gender inequality, the low status of women, homophobia, and AIDS-related stigma and discrimination, and human rights violation.

Your Department of Health will continuously fight, remain pro-active, and sustain its responsiveness in the combat of this disease.

But the HIV/AIDS Response is really a joint responsibility. Our most important weapon against this disease will be our shared vision, advocacy, commitment and continued activism.

Together, we have to show compassion, concern and support for people living with HIV/AIDS. We have to fight the stigma and discrimination against them. We must uphold their human rights, including the right of the most at risk populations to right information and access to all life-saving interventions and modalities. Lastly, we

have to empower communities to bring change by and among themselves. Only then can we see a long lasting resolve to our HIV/AIDS problem in the country.

So together, let us carry on with this great task towards a harmonised effort in achieving our national targets against HIV. Let us fight it more mightily.

Thank you very much and Good morning.

Mabuhay tayong Lahat!