

## **Thailand: AIDS 2004 June 28, 2004**

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**PRESENTER:** Rarely have delegates to a conference gotten the kind of welcome being promised by one of the chief organizers of the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok. Senator Mechei Viraveidyre [misspelled?] is known popularly as the condom king.

**SENATOR:** We believe that once you hand in your passport at the airport, get a stamp, you are going to get a condom put inside with an envelope which gives you all the emergency numbers. Our policemen will help in traffic, give out condoms, we call that our cops and robbers program. We are going to be handing out condoms in taxis; the taxis will be handing out to other people. Hopefully also in schools, we already been doing that; and school kids will be handing out condoms in the community and also at the fore gates of expressway, motorways, this will also be done.

**PRESENTER:** The choice of the developing country in Asia for the conference is timely. Many regions have rising infection rates and one major study projects that by 2010, Asia will have more infections than all of sub-Saharan Africa today. About half a million Asians died of AIDS related illnesses in 2003. Recent initiatives have been announced or begun across this diverse region which contains more than half the world's population. However, analysts say India, China, Indonesia, Burma and portions of Indo China all have large HIV positive populations that could rise significantly. Thailand is often viewed as the poster example for others to follow in battling the AIDS epidemic especially in preventing infections; it responded with an imaginative public health campaign to slow the spread of HIV.

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Today it has begun distributing live extending antiretroviral drugs. However, even here the progress has sometimes seemed precarious and there are fears of a resurgence of infections. Thailand was the first country in Asia to be hit by an outbreak of HIV. It began among IV drug users in the mid 80's and spread rapidly thanks to this nation's thriving commercial sex industry. The response was spearheaded by Mechai Viraveidyre he fine tuned a condom-based campaign that actually began in the 70's well before AIDS when he was head of Thailand's Family Planning Program.

**SENATOR:** We started giving out condoms everywhere except at funerals, at weddings, at receptions, at parties, in traffic, everywhere. We said condoms are a wonderful product; use it for a snake bite, for deep cuts, to put Coca Cola in and use a lubrication or aftershave lotion as balloons, and now to put in mobile telephones during the rainy season. A condom is just from a rubber tree, if you are embarrassed by the condom, you must be more embarrassed by the tennis ball there's more rubber in it.

**PRESENTER:** He had the support of three sectors; the government, the military, and religious leaders in this predominantly Buddhist nation.

**SENATOR:** We found after the months were the most influential at the village level, and the villages who kept all of the same motorcycles or new cars or new room added, blessed by holy water. And the villages asked us 30 years ago could you get the monks to bless those condoms with holy water. I thought, well that's a great idea so I went and asked the monks, and he agreed; so he blesses condoms and the pills for the sanctity of the families.

So the religious institutions in Thailand have been very good, the

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Buddhists, the Muslims and the Catholic Church are very pleasant.

**PRESENTER:** The goal was to make condoms seem as ordinary and available to families as soap or toothpaste. When AIDS arrived the campaign shifted to making them more accessible to sex workers. The results were impressive; the number of new infections went from 140,000 per year in the early 90's to just over 20,000 per year by the end of that decade. Condom usage in the sex trade went from about 10 percent to well over 90 percent; however those downward trends began to stall in the late 90's. Analysts blame Thailand's financial crisis which led to cutbacks in AIDS funding and also complacency both in government and in the public health services after years of success. At the same time, more and more of the 1 million Thai's already HIV infected began to reach the terminal stages of AIDS. Some 450,000 have died so far leaving as many as 300,000 orphans. About 10 percent of them are HIV positive; caring for them is a critical challenge.

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Everyday we have one children coming here.

**MALE SPEAKER:** One child per day?

**FEMALE SPEAKER:** Yeah, one-and-a-half average.

**MALE SPEAKER:** One-and-a-half average, okay.

**PRESENTER:** This government-run orphanage in Bangkok houses 420 children; it is almost always full. Non-government organizations in Bangkok and especially in harder hit Northern provinces provide most of the shelter for Thai orphans. For some HIV negative children, international adoptions offer the best hope; meanwhile many adults among the 600,000 living with HIV and AIDS find that awareness of the disease has not necessarily translated into compassion. Brock Chubar was interviewed by PBS in 2002.

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**MR. CHUCHAR:** I keep secret many year but finally something happen in my skin; it begin to appear. I cannot keep secret anymore, so I come here because in society if you catch HIV, nobody want you, also your family.

**PRESENTER:** Brock Chuchar found refuge in a monastery called Watprovotnompoo [misspelled?]. It is one of Thailand's largest hospice facilities; the bones and ashes of thousands have come to die here lie unclaimed. Each day, busloads of tourists and school children come through; their donations keep this facility afloat. The avid founded it to promote better awareness, prevention, and acceptance of people with AIDS.

**MALE SPEAKER 2:** If they can see by themselves I probably listen or look at the picture, they cannot understand this. And it is a good way of education in our country.

**PRESENTER:** Last October, Thailand's fight against AIDS reached a milestone. It should mean a shorter wait for treatment with the grant from the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria; the government began distributing generic antiretroviral drugs produced in Thailand. By 2005, it hopes to increase production to reach 200,000 patients with the ARV therapy and even supply the drugs to neighboring countries. The growing availability of drugs is already having a visible impact for some providers on the clinical frontline. Dr. Somsic [inaudible] is one Bangkok's leading AIDS physicians.

**DOCTOR SUMSIC:** If I have a great impact for retroviral treatment to the patient because we are - so we treat the [inaudible] not the disease because in the past we see a lot of incapacitated patients lying all around here into the ward. Now we

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started antiretroviral treatment, most of the patient they didn't want to be admitted to the ward and they can - they are given the ability to now they can work and they can go home and they don't have to stay in the hospital anymore.

**PRESENTER:** But nationally the program has had growing pains, only a small minority of those who needs the drugs is now receiving them. And the idea of supplying other countries is controversial. There are protocols and criteria, but they still force doctors to make wrenching decisions about who to treat with the limited supply of drugs. Also many rural providers still need to be trained to administer ARV drugs, and in Bangkok Dr. Somsic says there remain gaps in public awareness about AIDS treatment.

**DOCTOR SUMSIC:** The difficulty I think is in the general population that patients not realize that they are at risk for infection, so the people who are sick - who are going for counseling for HIV testing so they can be - when they get sick, [inaudible].

**PRESENTER:** In time it is hoped the drugs will become available to all who need them; however even as the government tries to move forward with treatments, Thailand now feels itself tugged backward on prevention. Whether through complacency or design, prevention campaigns have not gotten through among significant populations like IV drug users. Critics like Human Rights Watch say harsh crackdowns on injection drug users discourage this high risk population from getting tested or seeking services. And while condoms may be widely available in the sex industry, they are not used by many vulnerable groups including IV drug users, but also gay men and especially the emerging generation of sexually active young people. Doctor Sombathancapachur [misspelled?] works for Thailand's

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Bureau of AIDS, TB and STD's.

**DOCTOR SOMBOT:** We know for sure that among youths people they have this higher risk. For example more proportion of youth are now engaging in causal sex and -

**MALE SPEAKER:** Casual sex?

**DOCTOR SOMBOT:** Yes, and less than 30 percent of this group of people using condoms when they are having sex. So this is an indication that Thailand we face another wave of epidemic in the near future if we do not provide prevention message to this group of people.

**PRESENTER:** And despite all the talk about de-stigmatizing condoms, it's still not easy for many Thai's even Dr. Sombot, to buy them.

**DR. SOMBOT:** When I was younger than this, you know, in my age many friends cannot buy cannot talk about condom. But nowadays condom is something like we can talk on the table during a meeting or something like that. But to buy a condom is something that still different, you know, for myself, I sometimes I pretend to go into the drug store and want to use a condom and want to buy a condom but when I face with the, you know, the sellers over the counter with most of the time a lady I just cannot speak out, I want to use condom -

**MALE SPEAKER:** It's culturally very -

**DOCTOR SOMBOT:** Right.

**PRESENTER:** So the health ministry has begun reworking it's condom programs. They now come in packaging designed to attract younger Thai's who will be able to buy them discreetly from vending machines.

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**MALE SPEAKER 3:** We have placed these more than 3,000 machines all over the country and we want to dispense these more; maybe something like another 6, 7,000. And this is a very good access to go to the people because we put into the [inaudible] several places like department stores and public stations and the price of these condoms is very cheap; it is subsidized partially by the government. Only 2 out of 5 people can access to piece of condoms, I am going to show you, you get 2 condoms for five packs for about 10 cents with this very cheap price.

**PRESENTER:** What does the condom think about all of this?

**SENATOR:** What we have been living on the last few years is basically momentum that was built up 5 years ago, and there has been complacency. The proportion of funds going to education and to prevention to condom has come down a lot and for treatment has gone up. We need, and I've requested this of the government and I am even helping with getting condoms from America, 6 million condoms coming in. We have to keep on pushing and pushing and pushing and you cannot expect governments to be imaginative; beaurocracy is not colorful, it's not imaginative; it's not therefore, so we need also people to come in and help and if you let it go, yes complacency sets is. Messages have to change like the brown juice of the American sauce around the world; the messages keep on changing; otherwise, people wouldn't drink it. So we have to use the same method as the commercial products.

**PRESENTER:** Thai organizers are using the AIDS Conference to focus greater attention on issues affecting youth. They are even giving school children the week off; not only to lessen Bangkok's world famous traffic snarls but also to participate in events at the

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conference and learn more about AIDS. Organizers also hope the marketing efforts they put into this year's conference will yield a more immediate benefit, a profit. It will be used to purchase more antiretroviral drugs.

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