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## **Kaisernetwork.org Interview with Sen. Mechai Viravaidya November 7, 2003**

**LARRY LEVITT:** This is Larry Levitt from Kaisernetwork.org and I'm here with Mechai Viravaidya of Thailand. He's the founder and Chairman of the Population and Community Development Association, an NGO about to celebrate its 30th anniversary. And as Senator he helped create Thailand's national AIDS policy. Now he's Community Co-Chair of the 15th International AIDS Conference, which comes to Bangkok next summer. Senator Mechai, let's start with the conference itself. This conference every two years brings together scientists, researchers, community people, NGOs, to discuss new developments in the HIV/AIDS epidemic and focus the world's attention on the disease. Tell us a little bit about what sort of themes or messages you expect to come out of the conference next year.

**MECHAI VIRAVAIDYA:** Well, the overall theme is access for all, but we hope it's not going to be just talk, it's going to be action. Perhaps the most important one is we will have by that time a very clear pilot demonstration whereby Thailand will be providing drugs, ARVs, for people from three neighboring countries, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, who will walk over the border to come and get drugs supplied by Thailand - by the Thai government. This will be funded partially by the government, some NGOs, and some business. And what's going to happen after this is that the profits or the surplus generated

which will be used for further ARV for people in these countries. We talk about AIDS having no boundaries, but in reality there's no such thing. So we're going to make it a reality. So that's just the first one, access for all. Not only for your country-people, but also for your neighbors. So you've got to help your neighbors. So that's the first one where there's going to be a real action. I just want to demonstrate that first rather than just say, well, we're going to talk about this or that. But what about action to follow? Because people have been somewhat disappointed. There have been a lot of promises but not so much deliveries.

**LARRY LEVITT:** And you talked about treatments.

Certainly you've spent many years working on prevention as well. You've been a leader in Thailand and around the world on prevention issues, started the Cabbages and Condoms restaurant here in Bangkok. Talk about where we are globally on our efforts to prevent the disease. I mean it's 100% preventable.

**MECHAI VIRAVAIIDYA:** I say that we have

(unintelligible). In fact so many conferences - in fact look at the last three international AIDS conferences. There were no real sessions on prevention, even condoms. They use the word prevention and they use everything else but the condom in discussion. So we're going to do more and more. For instance when you land at the airport we hope that when immigration

into your passport, just to remind you you're here and this is something prevential (misspelled?). Then we will have a program of policemen who work with traffic, stop traffic, and give out condoms. We call that our Cops and Rubbers program. And we're going to ask quite a few people who are interested in attending the conference to come and join the police in giving out condoms and saving lives. So that's to demonstrate not just to talk. And we hope also to have some demonstrations as to how it works. We've had AIDS education in primary school output. They'll get to see - out of the conference to see these things going on. And we'll have all sorts of activities that they can realize that it's not difficult. AIDS is something totally preventable and anyone who can change attitude and behavior must be involved, not just doctors and just nurses, and so that this conference has to concentrate on every area that is a possibility. And the other one is very important. We're bringing in youth and leaders, so in addition to the other conferencers we're going to have a major program with youth and leaders. And the youth are going to be involved in every aspect including their own session and sessions that the question leaders of the world. We have quite a few leaders in the world coming. And we want from them not just to stand up and talk but to say what would they promise. We expect them to say as politicians, they're going to get more politicians

care.

**LARRY LEVITT:** And there have been some very high profile promises recently - the WHO's three million people treated by 2005, President Bush's Global AIDS Initiative the Global Fund recently initiated. What's your sense of - how much optimism do you have about -

**MECHAI VIRAVAIDYA:** Well, often when people make promise and other people don't follow up, so as a result one of the things we've established is a mechanism to follow up on promises. So we'll have different groups - if anyone amongst the youth group makes a promise, if somebody from Rotary (misspelled?) or Alliance makes a promise we're going to follow it up. Remember you made this promise? Where are you? Where are you? Where are you? So now it's not just asking people to make promises, it's getting a group of people ready to follow up on those promises and in fact we're going to get to be very heavily involved with media to ask them to be involved, to follow up.

**LARRY LEVITT:** In recent years much of the world's focus on the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been in Africa. Bringing this conference to Bangkok will certainly turn the world's attention to the emerging epidemic in Asia and Thailand in particular. When people come here to Bangkok next summer, what do you think they'll see in terms of the state of the HIV/AIDS

**MECHAI VIRAVAIIDYA:** Well, what they will hear is that Asia is expanding extremely rapidly in terms of HIV and action really needs to be taken. That's number one. And what they will see in Thailand is here's a country that became serious about it and no more denial, and action was really taken. We've seen over the last 12 years a 90% decline in new cases of HIV. So - and a lot of NGOs are involved, a lot of people are involved. Businesses have to be involved. Amongst the people being invited will be the business community and we hope that they will also send in a lot of youth - sponsored youth, and so when they go back more action by youth. And when you're talking about trying to change attitude and behavior of youth, they have to be involved in designing the content and the program. So the leaders will also be asked to come in - for instance somebody leading the hotel industry as an example. We hope that person will make a promise that I will try my very best to get all hotels to be involved in HIV education of their staff to be aware and something to do with their customers. And finally hopefully that we hope to be a major target test that all hotels in the world will have condoms in their mini-bars.

**LARRY LEVITT:** What do you attribute Thailand's success to?

**MECHAI VIRAVAIIDYA:** Real effort. We had a Prime

member of his cabinet and then I explained the reasons and the economic impact as well as the health issues and said that he should be the Chairman of National AIDS Committee - head of the whole thing. Not the Minister of Health. The Minister can be a deputy. And that we increase by the 54 (misspelled?). I said every ministry that can affect behavior or attitude or changes must be involved. Businesses must be involved. Businesses must educate their staff and also help to educate their customers, whether they're insurance companies, banks, petroleum companies giving out AIDS information and condoms. So everyone must be involved, not just the medical professions. So that's why we have in Thailand AIDS education in schools, from primary school upwards, in factories, in rural villages, and everyone is involved.

**LARRY LEVITT:** Senator Mechai, final question. Bangkok is notorious for its traffic. When people come here to the AIDS Conference next summer are they going to be able to get out to the convention center?

**MECHAI VIRAVAIIDYA:** Well, since the police are very keen on helping us on HIV/AIDS, they'll be giving out condoms, they'll be special plans for traffic. All schools in Bangkok are going to have a holiday, so traffic will be considerably less and people will be delighted to find out that they can get out there in very rapid time. We also have the elevated rail

car. It should be pretty good and I think we're going to have a great time. They'll leave Bangkok and say that's what an AIDS conference is going to be like in the future.

**LARRY LEVITT:** Thank you, Mechai. Thanks for  
(unintelligible).

**MECHAI VIRAVAIIDYA:** Pleasure.

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