Official Opening of the Pendang Youth Centre in conjunction with World AIDS Day 2004

Thursday, 25 November 2004 – Pendang, Kedah, Malaysia

REMARKS

Ms. Gaye Phillips
UNICEF Representative, Malaysia
UNICEF Special Representative, Singapore & Brunei

Her Royal Highness Datoô Seri Tunku Puteri Intan Safinaz

YB Encik Rozai bin Shafian
Speaker Kedah State Assembly

YB Puan Suraya Yaakob
Member of Kedah State Assembly

Distinguished Guest

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Every minute of every day around the world, six young people between the age of 15 and 24 become HIV-positive.

HIV/AIDS is increasingly a disease of the young and most vulnerable. Of the 38 million people alive today with HIV infection, at least a third are young people under the age of 25. Young women face twice the risk of HIV infection from young men.

There are special reasons as to why young people are especially vulnerable to HIV infection. One is that adolescence and youth are times of discovery, emerging feelings, exploration of new behaviours and relationships. It is a time when young people feel they need to test their boundaries to determine who they are and what they can do. Establishing healthy behavioural patterns during this time is therefore critical to keep our young people safe and a lot easier than having to change risky behaviour later on.

Teenage years and the transition to adulthood is a very taxing period for both parents and youths. Since they are so vulnerable, youths are faced with peer pressures and influences. They go through physical, emotional and psychological changes which come along with a range of problems. Expectations are "imposed" upon them and on their part, youths have a need for acceptance by family, peers and society. Advice sought is normally from friends, which more often than not, can lead them astray. Hence, appropriate guidance and communication are vital to assist youths to be able to make independent and correct decisions in life.

Lack of supportive environments to practice safer behaviours and disturbingly low basic knowledge on HIV infection and transmission gives rise to this pandemic problem. At the United Nations General assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in June 2001, governments of the world agreed to reduce the HIV prevalence among young men and women aged 15 to 24 in the most affected countries by 25 per cent by 2005 and by 25 per cent globally by 2010. They also agreed on access to information, education including peer education, youth specific HIV education, life skills to reduce vulnerability to HIV infection

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is UNICEFís top priority to fight the HIV/AIDS pandemic. One of the ways in which we can help our young people deal with the pains of growing up is to provide them with ñsafe spacesò to meet and socialize with peers. These spaces should be created in a protective and non-judgmental environment where they can receive information and counseling; and establish connectednessòwith adults. Such programs have proven to be successful in helping young people build their skills and confidence that they need to help prevent them from the risky behaviours and of HIV infection.

The PROSTAR Youth Centre in Pendang, Kedah is such a model. The first of its kind in Malaysia, the Centre aims to involve young people in programmes that will not only educate them about HIV, but also give them a sense of pride, responsibility and commitment to remain safe from HIV infection as well as help educate their peers about HIV/AIDS. Dedicated young people around the world are proving every day that this type of peer education and support works for the benefit of youths.

Such one-stop information service point by youths and for youths will provide our young people a safe and comfortable haven for them to relax and carry out healthy lifestyle activities. The Centre is equipped with information on health, HIV/AIDS, counselling and a hotline service. Others facilities include a cyber café, a mini library, a mini gym and an area for indoor games. Peer educators will be trained to further train other youths to extend the out-reach of this programme to the youth community.

UNICEF is confident that such Centers will have an equally positive outcome for young Malaysian men and women in time to come. It is hoped that there will more such centers in the smaller towns of other states in Malaysia so that the majority of the youth population is well versed and equipped with knowledge on HIV/AIDS.

Partnership at all levels is crucial since a global problem such as HIV/AIDS cannot be defeatedby a single organization. I would like to highlight that this Drop-in Centre which is being launched today is an outcome of the excellent collaboration by Ministry of Health (Kuala Lumpur), Department of Health Kedah, a number of youth volunteers from Prostar Kedah and UNICEF. I would hope that all the youths in Kedah will learn accurate knowledge of HIV/AIDS and share the information withothers.

Finally, I would like to congratulate the Government of Malaysia for its leadership and commitment in always making its children its top priority. We are grateful for this opportunity to partner the Ministry of Health Malaysia, and the Kedah Health Department for this very important pilot project.

It is UNICEFís hope to further strengthen the partnership withthe Government of Malaysia, in particular the Ministry of Health to reduce the prevalence and reverse the present trend of HIV/AIDS in the country. We invite all of you to help create a healthy Malaysia for the young people of today, the future generation and the leaders of tomorrow.

Thank you.