

The nine requests for tomorrow



By Nattha Keenapan, UNICEF Thailand

BANGKOK, June 2009 – What do 20,000 children living with HIV in Thailand want and need from their government and the rest of society?

The answer to that question was provided at the National AIDS Conference, which was held in late May at Impact Convention Center and attended by Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva and some other 2,500 government officials and members of the public.

At the conference, 17 children living with HIV staged a drama entitled “For Tomorrow” as their preferred way of putting forth the nine key things they believe society needs to do for them. Their requests covered several issues, including ending discrimination, promoting HIV and sex education, developing child-friendly medicines, protecting reproductive health rights and ensuring confidentiality.

“New”, 18, who was born with HIV, told the Prime Minister and other members of the audience that: “I used to think I was worthless because I was discriminated against by everyone and because I thought I would die soon. But when I was given an opportunity to study and do other activities, I realized my life was worthwhile and that I was actually capable of doing many things.”

New asked the government to help ensure that children with HIV have the same opportunities that other children have to develop to their full potential. She wants all children living with HIV to realize – as she has come to realize – that they have the same capacity and potential as other children.

The play was part of an ongoing UNICEF-supported project started in 2003 to promote painting, photography, drama and other creative activities for children living with HIV. Over the past three years, New and a group of other children with HIV have traveled to numerous provinces around the country to perform an entertaining and moving drama called “Who am I? Why am I Here?”, which focused on stories of the discrimination and other problems the children face.

While the children usually wear masks for much of their “Who am I? Why am I Here?” performances, they chose not to wear them during their performance before the Prime Minister. The dialog of “For Tomorrow” also differs markedly from the

earlier production, moving beyond sad stories to capture the children's urgent requests for actions that would help ensure their health and provide them with a better future.

Introducing the drama was popular actress Ann Thongprasom, who is a UNICEF Youth Ambassador. She called upon the Prime Minister, the other policy makers present and the public to do everything within their power to ensure that the children requests are fulfilled.

Chutima Saisengjan, a coordinator for We Understand Group, the non-government organization which runs the creative project, said the issues covered in the drama are ones the children believe remain problematic for them.

"The children came up with these themselves, and they are asking someone to do something about them," Chutima said.

In Thailand, despite numerous awareness raising and sensitization campaigns, rampant discrimination persists against children living with HIV.

A 2006 national survey covering 43,000 households showed that nearly 80 per cent of people in Thailand still have negative attitudes towards people living with HIV. The survey, conducted by National Statistical Office with support from UNICEF, found that many parents do not want their children to play with children living with HIV because they mistakenly assume their children will be infected with the virus. As a result, many children with HIV are ostracized by their friends – sometimes even by their families – and they are often excluded from school and by their communities.

Recently, three children living with HIV in a northeastern province were reportedly asked to leave their kindergarten after the school learned that they are HIV-positive. Another school rejected an HIV-positive boy who was about to start Grade 7. The report caught the attention of the Prime Minister who said such discrimination violated the constitution over human rights and dignity.

"I want all parents to understand about HIV and AIDS so that they won't teach their children to discriminate against the children who have the virus," said Dab, 16, who was born with HIV. "It is not easily transmitted so please don't be afraid."

Besides educating adults, the children also asked that all other children with HIV be educated about the virus so that they too will no longer be afraid and continue to suffer from it the way this group of children used to be.

During the rehearsal, Rah, 19, asked her drama teachers if she could speak about the right for reproductive health for people living with HIV. Like other teenagers, Rah, who inherited the virus from her mother at birth, is now having questions and concerns about sex.

"Adults are usually afraid that we will go have sex and spread the virus," Rah said. "But I want them to know that we also want to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend and a family like everyone else. It doesn't mean that we want to spread the virus to other people."

As the HIV prevalence rate surged in Thailand in the late early to mid 1990s, a large number of children inherited the virus from their mothers. Due to the growing availability of anti-retroviral medicines (ARV) over recent years, many of the children affected then have been able to remain healthy and are now teenagers.

Rah said sex education is now crucial for these teenagers, and that it should cover the topics of love, dating, sexual desire and behavior so that they will better understand their desires and express them in non-harmful ways.

During their drama, the children also talked about taking ARV every day of their lives. While ARV are provided free of charge in Thailand, most of the pills are very large and are not specifically designed to be taken by children.

“They are huge and hard to swallow,” said Dab who has been taking a handful of pills every 12 hours since he was nine years old. “They are so bitter that they often made me puke.”

Although the children know how crucial the medicines are to keeping them healthy, they sometimes stop taking them, especially when they become depressed. The We Understand Group’s Chutima said that around 10 per cent of teenagers living with HIV who join the art project have stopped taking their medicine at least once. As a result, these children become resistant to the medicine, and must take other, more powerful medicine to protect their immune systems.

“Can the pills be made smaller and less bitter?” asked Ple, 17, who hoped to convey her message to pharmaceutical companies. “Can we take fewer pills and can we take them less often? This would help encourage us to take them.”

Chutima said that creative activities like drama are playing a key role in the children’s overall healing process. She has seen children become more confident not only in expressing their emotions but also in coming up with ideas on how to improve their lives as well as the lives of other children with HIV.

At the close of the drama, the children lighted candles and sang a song of love and faith to encourage everyone to help ensure a better future for them.

“We want to help our friends who are still suffering from HIV,” The children said. “We want to be like these small candles, we want to light up the darkness and stay bright in the minds of everyone forever.”

.....

* All of the children’s names have been changed

