

*Address*

*by*

*Dr Samlee Plianbangchang  
Regional Director, WHO/SEARO*

*at the  
Joint Inauguration of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of Ministers of  
Health and 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the WHO Regional  
Committee for South-East Asia*

*Kurumba Resorts, Maldives  
5 September 2004*

**Address by Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia Region at the Joint Inauguration of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of Ministers of Health and 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia, Maldives, 5 September 2004**

- Your Excellency, Mr Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, President of the Republic of Maldives;
- Your Excellency, Mr Ahmed Abdullah, Minister of Health, The Republic of Maldives;
- Hon'ble Ministers of Health from South-East Asia Region;
- Excellencies;
- Distinguished Country Representatives;
- Ladies and gentlemen,
- It is a great pleasure for me to address this joint inauguration of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Meeting of Ministers of Health, and the 57<sup>th</sup> Session of the WHO Regional Committee for South-East Asia.
- Your Excellency, Mr President, we deeply appreciate your august presence to inaugurate these two important meetings.
- It is a clear demonstration of your government's abiding interest in the health and welfare of people in the Region.

- I am very happy that the Hon'ble Health Ministers are able to spare time to come inspite of their heavy responsibilities at home.
- On behalf of the World Health Organization and on my own behalf, I extend my sincere thanks to the Government of the Republic of Maldives for hosting the meetings, and making the excellent arrangements.
- The Republic of Maldives joined WHO in 1965.
- Since then, we have witnessed remarkable progress in national development, in spite of scattered geographical location of atolls and resource constraints.
- Per capita income increased from only US\$ 352 in 1981 to US\$ 2,090 in 2002.
- Overall literacy rate also increased from 92% in 1980 to 98% in 2001.
- In the health area, life expectancy at birth increased from 50 years in 1980 to 71 years in 2003.
- The infant mortality rate decreased from 94 in 1980 to 14/1,000 live births in 2003.
- Crude death rate decreased from 12 in 1980 to 4 per 1,000 population in 2000.
- Leprosy has been eliminated since 1997.

- The country has been free from polio for 23 years.
- This impressive development was contributed, among other things, by a sound health system, developed to serve the health needs of the country within its national and local situations.
- We must congratulate the Republic of Maldives for these commendable achievements in health development.
- Hon'ble Ministers, Excellencies and Distinguished Country Representatives,
- This is the first time that I have the honour and privilege of addressing this distinguished audience as Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia Region.
- I do so with a total sense of responsibility and deep humility.
- It would never have been possible for me to be in this position without the trust and confidence reposed in me by the Member States in the Region, for which I am indeed grateful.
- Let me take this opportunity to re-affirm that I will dedicate myself fully and do my best for WHO and for the development of health for all peoples in South-East Asia.

- With devoting health workforce, and with strong tradition of solidarity and close collaboration among countries in the Region, I am confident that WHO in South-East Asia will live up to any expectation of the Member States.
- To pursue my function effectively, I will have to count on the goodwill, guidance and leadership of the Member States in the Region.
- Your Excellency, Mr President,
- These two important meetings are being held to address the challenges that we face together, and to maximize the opportunities for better health of all our peoples.
- There has been a remarkable progress made in the development of health technology and interventions over the last 50 years.
- We together will have to ensure that our peoples too will maximally benefit from these advancements.
- This is one of our real challenges, in view of resource constraint prevailing in countries.
- Now, let us look at some of our achievements.
- We have eradicated smallpox and guinea-worm disease.
- Leprosy is now targeted for elimination by the end of next year.

- We will soon eradicate poliomyelitis from this part of the world.
- On the other hand, our progress in health area faces formidable challenges due to the re-emergence of tuberculosis and malaria, and the rising incidence of noncommunicable diseases.
- HIV/AIDS is threatening to offset the gains from our health and socioeconomic development.
- As we are well aware, our Region also has to contend with widespread poverty and illiteracy.
- Unchecked population growth, increasing environmental degradation, global warming, improperly planned urbanization, and rapid industrialization continue to pose serious risks to health.
- These are challenges waiting to test our capability and capacity in moving forward in health development in the years to come.
- However, these may be considered as the opportunity for us to review our health policies and programmes, with the view to reorient our strategies and resources for maximum gains in the development efforts.
- Hon'ble Ministers, Distinguished Representatives;

- Fifteen years ago, the UN Commission on Environment and Development placed people at the centre of development.
- The World Summit on Sustainable Development recognized the centrality of health in the development process.
- The Global Commission on Macroeconomics and Health has also emphasized that increased investment in health leads to social and economic development.
- By scaling up investment in health, we can stimulate economic growth and reduce poverty; and these in return further enhance health development.
- The Millennium Development Goals recognize the critical role of health in reducing poverty and contributing to overall development.
- The MDGs are central to our agenda for forging towards a healthier world.
- It is to reiterate that within the context of these goals that health is both a goal in itself, and a key input towards other development perspectives.
- The centrality of health in sustainable development must be recognized and operationalized through national development policies, plans and strategies;

- Strong political commitment and leadership at all levels are really needed in these processes.
- To ensure that all peoples in our Region will be optimally healthy, we need to close the disparities in health in countries and among countries.
- In order to do so, we need health systems with a real vigour in all countries, that can ensure universal access to quality health care and services for all.
- Health systems development will continue to be the key priority, that underpins all our efforts in the Region to improve peoples' health.
- Ladies and gentlemen,
- As we well know, our countries are facing the double burden of communicable and noncommunicable diseases, as well as persistent poverty and severe resource constraint.
- The countries are finding it increasingly difficult to move forward in national development due to lack of necessary resources.
- At the national scale, health is still given low priority on the government agenda in many countries.

- Health Ministers are the best persons to persuade their Heads of States and Heads of Governments, as well as Planning and Finance Ministers, that putting more money into health is one of the sound investments for any country.
- However, all of us, at all levels have to continue pursuing in a big way to advocate for a prominent place for health in the national development agenda.
- Furthermore, we have to ensure the best use of resources presently available for our disposal in health development.
- To achieve our goals in this regard, among other things, we need to seriously review the area of human resources as a priority consideration.
- We need to particularly focus on the strengthening of public health and medical workforce, to make them more socially and ethically responsible, and committed to the goals of health for all.
- More importantly is the involvement of peoples of all walks of life in their health improvement and maintenance.
- With these, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, we will have a long way to go in our quest for health for all.

- Hon'ble Ministers,
- International unity for health was the basis, on which the World Health Organization was established more than five decades ago.
- This solidarity was strongly evident once again when we unitedly fought and contained the outbreaks of emerging diseases, like SARs and Avian Influenza.
- Similarly, the fight against HIV/AIDS will succeed only through international solidarity and cooperation.
- The Global Fund established to help fight against the scourge of HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria has been very instrumental in providing much needed financial resources.
- I am pleased to report that the countries of our Region are getting due benefit from this Fund.
- International cooperation is also required to ensure that the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control adopted by World Health Assembly more than a year ago will come into force soon.
- Ladies and gentlemen,
- The problems and constraints in health development in our Region are daunting, but really challenging to all of us.

- The best strategies and interventions to ensure equitable health care and services for all are yet to be realized through our combined wisdom and joint efforts.
- Shortly after assuming office, the WHO Director-General, Dr LEE Jong-wook, said, “We must do the right things; we must do them in the right place; and we must do them in the right way”.
- Excellencies, I would like to add in this connection that we must do them at the right time.
- Now it is time for us to revisit our development plans and redirect our course of actions to ensure our ability to effectively tackle health challenges now and in future.
- I have no doubt that the ensuing two meetings would further enhance regional unity and collaboration to ensure the best gains from our health development endeavours.
- We look forward to the advice and guidance of the Hon’ble Health Ministers and the distinguished Country Representatives to the Regional Committee.
- Excellencies, distinguished representatives, ladies and gentlemen,
- In conclusion, let me again thank His Excellency, Mr Maumoon Abdul Gayoom for the gracious presence at this inauguration.

- I wish the meetings all success, and all the best to you all.
- Thank you.