

Acceptance Speech by Dr. Samlee Plianbangchang

RD-elect, South-East Asia Region

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Board, Director-General, Regional Directors, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen.

I am deeply honoured to be appointed as Regional Director of WHO South-East Asia by the Executive Board. At the same time, I am most grateful to the 11 Member States of the Region for nominating me to this post.

As a public health servant, I am deeply conscious of the responsibilities this entails. I would like, therefore, to take this opportunity of re-dedicating myself to the achievement of better health for the people of the South East Asia Region who, with a population of more than 1.5 billion, account for 25% of the world's population but 40% of the world's poor. I pledge my

full support to the efforts of our Member States in their quest for health for all people.

Having had the privilege of serving WHO in South-East Asia for more than 16 years, I am particularly waiting for the opportunity of taking forward some initiatives that would usher in major benefits for the Region.

The South-East Asia Region has much for which to be justifiably proud. But it, perhaps, has more of which to be concerned. For example, though life expectancy has increased significantly in all countries, and, in fact, infant mortality rates have registered an average annual decline of 5% over the past few years; still in some countries, maternal mortality is unacceptably high. In certain cases, it is over 400 per 100,000 live-births.

We have made considerable progress in the areas of elimination of leprosy and eradication of poliomyelitis, but it still remains an unfinished agenda. These are yet to be achieved

soon. Other diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria continue to pose serious health challenges. As for HIV/AIDS, the Region is witnessing alarming rates of increase in some countries. The epidemic is indeed spreading faster in Asia than in any other continent.

Compounding these problems is the scarcity of resources. Even though the Region has received considerable support from the Global Fund and other sources; there is a wide gap between what is available and what is needed. This gap needs to be narrowed as much as possible. We will work harder, at least to make the 3 by 5 initiative a reality in the Region.

Health systems remain weak in many countries. We need to build a solid foundation to effectively tackle the major health issues and promote good health. In this context, I would like to stress initially the urgent need for development of capable manpower through strengthening public health education and practice.

However, grim though the scenario is, there is no dearth of dedication and commitment on the part of the Member States. WHO, on its part, is ready to provide all support that is needed to ensure that the health gains achieved so far are sustained, and that efforts are doubled for further development progress.

In order to meet the needs of the Member States, it is important that we strengthen WHO's country presence, and move technical support closer to them. This is with particular emphasis on the countries in greatest needs. Decentralizing activities and responsibilities to countries will be one of my overriding priorities during the next 5 years. In this regard, we will spare no efforts in implementing the strategic framework outlined by the Director-General.

Overall, I believe our policy direction for the future is laid out solidly. However, we need to revisit our priorities regularly, based on our commitment to the Millennium Development

Goals. At the same time, we need to ensure that the core principles guiding WHO's work are implemented in letter and spirit.

Under the policy guidance of the Director-General, Dr. Lee Jong-wook, I look forward to working closely with other Regional Directors in moving towards our common goals. There is a lot that we can achieve together in terms of the unfinished agenda. We also have new challenges to take forward.

It is a particular privilege to be appointed as Regional Director on this day; when my colleague, Dr. Shigeru Omi, Regional Director for the Western Pacific, is re-appointed for his second term. Since our two Regions are somewhat interwoven, we pledge to work together more closely in order to achieve maximal synergy in our work.

While commending the Member States for their sustained efforts in health development, despite the formidable odds, I

would like to take this opportunity of placing on record the guidance and leadership provided by Dr. Uton Muchtar Rafei. There is much for which I am grateful to him. Most importantly, I am grateful that he is leaving behind the achievements, from which I can continue building in the Region a more solid foundation for health, which will not be seen as a privilege for some, but a right for all.

Thank you.