

**Statement by Dr. Nafis Sadik  
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**at the**

**Dialogue on Security in Asia: Concepts, Threats and  
Assurances after 9/11**

**'Transformations in Multilateral Security Arrangements:  
Charting Perceptions, Capacities and Responses in an  
Era of Assertive US Policy'**

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As a member of the Secretary-General's High Level Panel I am really here to listen to suggestions rather than to make them; but I have some ideas of my own – as usual – so here they are.

We are of course aware that security has a social aspect; but in the present climate, governments and international organisations are thinking of and preparing for more immediate threats. But I believe that it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the disruptive potential among large population groups who feel oppressed, deprived or excluded. And in Asia today, we have an explosive mixture: first, rapid urbanisation with a large proportion of young people; second, rapid economic growth; third, growing inequality and finally, persistent deep poverty. The burgeoning HIV/AIDS pandemic could be the flame that ignites the mixture.

### Poverty, Security and Urban Growth

More than half of Asia's population is now urban, and although the rate of urban growth is slowing, urban numbers are increasing faster than ever. A large proportion of these urban populations, more than half in some cases, are living in deep poverty. There are more than 150 million young people among Asia's urban poor. These are the same young people on whom economic success depends. Yet many of them have no means of reaching the prosperity and high levels of consumption that they can see in their own cities, on TV and through the internet.

In the 1990s, global wealth increased faster than at any time in history. Yet there has never been a steeper gradient between rich and poor countries, and between the richest and the poorest people. The net worth of the world's three richest people is greater than the national product of 41 of the world's poorest countries.

Such conditions encourage extremism and sow the seeds of violence. True fanatics may be few in number, but they do not act alone. They find troops and support among the disaffected urban populations, and especially among the young.

### HIV/AIDS in Asia

To this volatile mix, we must now add the threat of HIV/AIDS. In case you think this is special pleading, from my background in public health and my perspective as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific, let me remind you of some realities of the pandemic. In the most seriously affected countries:

- The social structure is collapsing as teachers, health workers, police and administrators fall to the disease.
- The economic structure is also under pressure. Employers are hiring two people for every vacancy, expecting that one will be lost to AIDS.
- The economies of the worst-hit countries will be 20-40 per cent smaller in the coming years than they would have been without HIV/AIDS.
- Starvation is a real threat, because rural areas have lost the young adults who do most of the agricultural work. To the extent that urban areas rely on local produce, they too are at risk.

Could this happen in Asia? The answer is unequivocal. Yes. Asia's epidemic is at the stage that Africa's was in 1990. General rates of infection are still below 1 per cent: but there are areas of concentration, in which rates are much higher. In parts of several Asian countries, the infection has already broken out of the high-risk groups and into the population at large. I think it is important to remember that the high-risk groups are in no way segregated from the community. With some exceptions, people at the highest risk have homes and families. Intravenous drug users; men who have sex with men; the clients of sex workers, and others who have multiple partners bring the disease into their homes and infect their wives—I say wives because the high-risk groups are predominantly men.

Asia has a much stronger economic base than Africa. But Asian countries cannot rely on economic development to rescue them from HIV/AIDS. The relationship between poverty and HIV transmission is not so simple. If it were, South Africa might not have Africa's largest epidemic, for South Africa is rich by African standards. Botswana is, or was, a prosperous country; yet it has the highest levels of infection in the world.

I don't want to spoil your dinner, but I have to state my belief that HIV/AIDS is poised to sweep through Asia in the next decade. It is a belief shared by many close observers, including, I have to say, the CIA. The pandemic could disrupt Asia's economic development: it will certainly hold back economic growth. It will spread insecurity and instability in the cities, and in more fragile economies of outlying provinces. It could shake the structure of government and administration in whole countries. It will certainly lead to fear and unrest among urban populations. The consequences for security in the region could be profound.

And to those who say that it cannot happen in Asia, I have to reply – you are mistaken. There is nothing inherent in Asia's culture or society, ancient and unique though it is, that will protect you against HIV/AIDS. Only action – prompt, committed action under determined leadership – will prevent an African-style catastrophe in Asia.

## Leadership

Let me remind you that there is still no cure for HIV/AIDS and no vaccine against it. The cost of treatment is out of reach of most of Asia's people, and, on the scale needed, probably out of the reach of Governments to provide it. In any case, treatment alone will not stop the pandemic. The only effective way is for people to avoid sex with an infected person wherever possible, and to protect themselves from the risk of infection.

A successful prevention strategy has three elements:

- First, is to reach *high-risk groups* with information and services, including condoms, and voluntary counselling and testing for HIV/AIDS. Asia must not allow association with high-risk groups to stigmatise everyone living with HIV/AIDS. Removing the stigma of HIV/AIDS is the single most difficult obstacle to an effective prevention programme. It calls for leadership above all – for political leaders willing to take political risks; to confront and openly discuss sensitive matters such as drug use, commercial sex, and sex outside marriage.
- Second, young people need an open discussion about risks and how to minimise them. This is vital—fully half of all new infections are among people 15-24. Marriage is no protection – we know for example that many infected women have had sexual relations only with their husbands. Migration exposes workers and their families to heightened risks. The message must be that HIV/AIDS can happen to anyone. Everyone must understand the importance of responsibility for protecting themselves and those they love. Men must understand that women are not to blame for the disease.
- Finally, we must promote and support women's power to make their own decisions. Women run a higher risk of infection than men, yet women lack the means to defend themselves. We must put in women's hands the means of their own protection, and empower their use.

The international community must join Asia in its fight to prevent an HIV/AIDS catastrophe. It is in everyone's interest: HIV/AIDS is less visible than avian flu or SARS, and takes longer to spread, but it is far more deadly in the long run than anything we have seen to date. Combined with urban growth, poverty, inequality and discontent, it may also produce the deadliest cocktail the world has yet seen.

Can Asian countries confront HIV/AIDS as well as the other risks to life and security? Yes, if Asia's leaders and Asia's people have a sufficient sense of urgency. But success will mean overturning many long-held assumptions: including reliance on force to deal with dissent; reliance on economic growth to ensure social development—and reliance on men to solve the problem. I hate to say it, but when it comes to HIV/AIDS prevention, men are the problem. If men

would do the right thing—that is, if they would abstain from sex where appropriate; remain faithful to their partners and use condoms—HIV/AIDS would disappear in a decade. But they will not, so instead we must put our faith in women, and give them the strength and the tools to do the job. If enough men join them, and men in leadership positions really do give a lead, then Asia may yet escape.

Thank you