



WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION

FIFTY-SEVENTH WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY
Agenda item 4

A57/DIV/7
21 May 2004

Address by Dr KIM Dae-jung Former President of the Republic of Korea

Geneva, Tuesday, 18 May 2004

Health care and poverty reduction as the starting point for the happiness of mankind

Honourable Chairman, Director-General Lee Jong-wook, health ministers and delegates from around the world:

It is an honour for me to be invited here to deliver a speech to such an illustrious gathering. I thank you.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has been the saviour and the hope of mankind since its establishment in 1948. Even when the world was divided by the differences in ideology and political system, WHO played a vital role in uniting the international community under its goal of improving health care for all of mankind. In particular, WHO provided its utmost support when the Korean people were struggling to recover from the destruction and dire poverty of the Korean War. I, along with the Korean people, would like to extend my sincere gratitude to WHO for its contribution.

Chairman, and distinguished participants,

The rapid advancement in knowledge and technology has made life more prosperous for mankind. Numerous opportunities for the advancement in all human endeavours have emerged in the process of globalization. Unfortunately, such development has not produced fair benefits to all countries and all groups of people. The divide between the haves and the have-nots is growing wider.

According to recent statistics from the World Bank, 1.2 billion people live on less than one dollar a day. In sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, the number of people suffering from poverty has increased even more after the 1990s.

Thanks to your efforts, there has been significant progress in the health sector. The overall life expectancy has increased, and we are now able to effectively control many more diseases. But these are the success stories of the advanced countries. A great number of people around the world still do not have much access to such benefits.

Such situation is clearly evident from various indicators. The difference in the life expectancy of the developed countries and the least developed countries is more than 20 years.

What is so heartbreaking for us is that the socially vulnerable, including children, are suffering the most. According to WHO, around 10 million people, or 20% of the 57 million people that died in the year 2002 were children under the age of five. And 98% of the 10 million were children from developing countries. Human resources are the most important means for development in many of these developing countries. The suffering of our children is an indicator that the hope and dreams are vanishing from our homes, society and country.

I believe that poverty is the most serious challenge that mankind currently faces. I see it as the biggest obstacle of WHO. We are living in an era of globalization, information revolution and a knowledge-based society. But many people do not have the access or the opportunity to reap the benefits of this new age, and the wealth gap in between and within countries is widening.

Poverty is the primary cause of hunger and disease. A prolonged state of poverty leads to the social and cultural discrimination of the poor, which is the major obstacle to social integration. Moreover, poverty, also, lies at the root of religious, ethnic and cultural conflicts. Without resolving poverty, we cannot deal with terrorism, spreading confusion around the world. Poverty is an issue that needs to be urgently addressed to bring about a peaceful and cooperative community for mankind in the 21st century. Extending the life expectancy of the poor, who makes up the absolute majority of the world population, is the most pressing task at hand in creating such a community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As you may well know, the Millennium Summit was held at the United Nations in September of 2000. I attended the meeting as the President of the Republic of Korea. At the Summit, the world leaders adopted the United Nations Millennium Declaration. In the Declaration, the world leaders decided to free mankind from the suffering of poverty as an important goal for the new millennium, and pledged to create environments in each country and the international community conducive to achieving this goal. Furthermore, we set the goal of reducing in half the number of people who live on less than a dollar a day by 2015. However, according to a report by the President of the World Bank, it is already becoming evident that there are difficulties in meeting this goal.

Cooperation with the international community is indispensable in the fight against poverty. The confusion and instability in one area is not confined to just that particular region but affects everywhere. It is imperative that the rich countries help the poor countries for the sake of their own stability and prosperity. There is also a need for global cooperation to resolve the inequity that has resulted from the digital divide.

Meanwhile, it is essential that each country establishes policies to eliminate poverty. Since becoming President in 1998, I implemented the “productive welfare” policy to assist the poor. The productive welfare policy, first of all, provides free health care services to the vulnerable people in the society who are incapable of supporting their livelihood. It provides up to 800 dollars in living cost for a family of four in Korea. Second, this policy does not end here, but provides education to the welfare recipients so that they can find stable jobs. To adapt to the age of knowledge-based economy in the 21st century, computer education was advocated for all the Korean people, from students, housewives, senior citizens, prisoners to soldiers and the physically challenged. Korea is now an IT powerhouse in the world. There are many instances of children from poor family backgrounds getting good jobs and attaining great success in venture capital industries.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Disease results in a loss in the labour force. For the poor, disease poses a threat to the survival of the household. This situation breeds many negative consequences, sometimes forcing children into the labour force and depriving them of an opportunity for education. Disease is one of the main reasons that stands in the way of the efforts of the people of developing countries trying to overcome poverty. Poverty accelerates the spread of disease. The spread of disease aggravates poverty, creating a vicious cycle.

We all know that the sub-Saharan African countries are suffering from the rampant spread of HIV/AIDS. More than 30 new strains of viruses, such as SARS and bird flu, have appeared during the past 30 years. Even more serious is the problem of not being able to find cures for them.

In this regard, I would like to applaud the works of WHO for promoting the well-being and the health services of mankind by strengthening international cooperation in the public health sector. I would also like to commend Director-General Lee for his efforts in fighting infectious diseases such as poliomyelitis for 20 years in WHO. I have high hopes for the “3 by 5” initiative which plans to treat 3 million HIV/AIDS patients by 2005, and other core initiatives of WHO, actively being pursued since the inauguration of Director-General Lee.

I especially extend my gratitude to WHO for its support to North Korea and hope that it can play an active role in improving the still-rudimentary public health conditions in North Korea. South Korea, too, is doing its utmost by sending food, fertilizers, medicine and clothes to North Korea every year. In the wake of the recent Ryongchon train explosion in the North, the South Korean government and people, out of great sympathy for their brethren, have actively joined hands to provide help in the recovery.

Honourable Chairman, and distinguished participants,

Nothing is as important to mankind as leading a healthy life free from starvation. Health and poverty reduction is the starting point for the happiness of mankind. Let us all work toward achieving this goal.

Thank you.

= = =